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AN ACE SCIENCE FICTION SPECIAL

R.A. LAFFERTY

PAST MASTER

"A first-rank speculative work."
—JUDITH MERRIL—

PAST MASTER

R A Lafferty

THE THREE big men were met together in a private building of one of them.

There was a clattering thunder in the street outside, but the sun was shining. It was the clashing thunder of the mechanical killers, ravening and raging. They shook the building and were on the verge of pulling it down.

They required the life and the blood of one of the three men and they required it immediately, now, within the hour, within the minute.

The three men gathered in the building were large physically, they were important and powerful, they were intelligent and interesting. There was a peculiar linkage between them: each believed that he controlled the other two, that he was the puppeteer and they were the puppets. And each was partly right in this belief. It made them an interlocking nexus, taut and resilient, the most intricate on Astrobe.

Cosmos Kingmaker, who was too rich. The Heraldic Lion.

Peter Proctor, who was too lucky. The Sleek Fox.

Fabian Foreman, who was too smart. The Worried Hawk.

"This is Mankind's third chance," said Kingmaker. "Ah, they're breaking the doors down again. How can we talk with it all going on?"

He took the speaking tube. "Colonel," he called out. "You have sufficient human guards. It is imperative that you disperse the riot. It is absolutely forbidden that they murder this man at this time and place. He is with us and is one of us as he has always been."

"The colonel is dead," a voice came back. "I am Captain John Chezem the Third, next in command."

"You be Colonel Chezem now," Kingmaker said. "Call out what reinforcements you need and prevent this thing."

"Foreman," said Peter Proctor softly within the room. "Whatever you are thinking this day, do not think it so strongly. I've never seen the things so avid for your life."

"It is Mankind's third chance we have been throwing away here,"

Kingmaker intoned to the other two in the room, speaking with great serenity considering the siege they were under. Even when he spoke quietly, Kingmaker was imposing. He had the head that should be on gold coins or on Great Seals. They called him the lion, but there were no lions on Astrobe except as statuary. He was a carven lion, cut out of the Golden Travertine, the fine yellow marble of Astrobe. He had a voice of such depth that it set up echoes even when he whispered. It was part of the aura of power that he set up about himself.

"Mankind's first chance was the Old World of Old Earth," Kingmaker said.

"What went wrong there, what continues to go wrong there, has been imperfectly analyzed. Earth is still a vital thing, and yet we must speak of it and think of it as something in the past. It didn't make it before in that Old World, and it isn't going to make it now. It has shriveled."

Thunder and bedevilment! They were howling and quaking worse than ever. They'd take the building apart stone by stone to get their prey, and they wouldn't be long about it. The mechanical killers were relentless when they came near their kill, and Fabian Foreman was their intended kill.

"Mankind's second chance was America, the New World of Old Earth,"

Kingmaker continued. "In one sense it was the First New World, a sort of childhood of ourselves. And Mankind experienced its second failure there.

That was really the end of Old Earth. She lives in our shadow now; has done so since we were big enough to cast a shadow."

Thunder, thumping thunder outside! The screaming of maniac machines!

"Astrobe is Mankind's third chance," continued the regal Kingmaker. "If we fail here we may not be given another opportunity. There is something of number and balance that tells us we cannot survive another loss. If we fail here we fail forever. And we are failing. Our luck has run out."

Howling, undermining, and a section of one of the outside walls beginning to slide!

"Our luck will never run out," Proctor stated. "We've oceans of luck still untapped. We are doing quite well."

"Those cases on Old Earth did not end in total failure," Foreman stated in a somewhat shaky voice, "though they did end in total death. And it is not a one, two, three thing. It is cyclic and it has happened many times."

It was veritable explosions outside when Foreman spoke. It was his life that the mechanical killers demanded right now. Hereafter all the conversation was a little difficult, almost submerged in the ocean of noise and violence.

"Oh my bleeding earsl They were black enough failures," Kingmaker cut back in, "but that blackness was shot full of lightning. True, there were many failures, Fabian, but I make three the magic number. The clock stood at the twentyfifth hour so often that the very survival of man through it all appears a miracle."

"Let's drag it back to daylight," Proctor growled softly above the noise that indicated that the killers had already broken into some of the upper rooms of the building. "Only ourselves are here and we are not impressed by each others' eloquence. We are here to select a candidate. We are not here to stay the crack of doom."

"Wrong, Proctor," Kingmaker rumbled like buried thunder, and Kingmaker was always impressed by his own eloquence. "We are here to stay the crack of doom. It has fallen to us three, the inner circle of the Masters, to do exactly that thing."

"Doom's been cracking for a long time, Cosmos," Proctor jibed. He was a sleek and pleasant man even when he took exception. His voice was a sort of mechanical purr, or was that of a fox that has been eating honey.

"Aye, how it cracks!" said Kingmaker. "If you have an ear for history, Peter, you will notice that it cracks louder every time. In many ways we are a meaner people this time around. Would we three be at the top of the heap in any of the earlier orders?"

"I repeat that the earlier testings of man were not total failures,"

Foreman said, "and perhaps they were not failures at all. They were deaths.

It is not the same thing."

The floors were being undermined. You could hear the hate-roaring of the things underfoot now.

"There has always been a web of desperate and quite incredible triumph," Foreman continued. "The indomitableness of man has so far been the most amazing thing about him. I hate to see it going out of us."

Foreman's voice did have a little of the hawk's cry in it, but also a jingle of old laughter. He was tall and graying and lined. He seemed older than the other two, and he wasn't. "We've lost so much! Every time we die we lose something. So much could have been done, so much became livid with rottenness, that we belittle what was done. So for one not quite total failure in the Old World of Old Earth we were given another life something over one thousand years ago. We were given the American thing."

"And failed even worse," Proctor purred with a sort of cheerful bitterness.

"No, we did not," Kingmaker protested. "We failed even better. It's an ascending spiral-till it breaks."

"That's true," Foreman said. "Our American failure was less nearly total.

With a New World to work in, and with unlimited prospects, we limited them shamefully. There was no error of the Old World that we did not

commit again in the New World on a vaster plane. But there was another side to it.

There were times when we almost balanced the loaded scales, when we reanimated both the Old and New Worlds. There were times when we won hands down when we didn't have a chance. We enlarged ourselves, the two hemispheres of us, and we set to tasks that before could not have been conceived.

"Oh, our failures were abysmal enough to sicken a scavenger, but we did come near to appreciating just how high the challenge is. That world died, though history does not record the event. So for that death, which was not quite a total failure, we were given yet another life."

"On Astrobe!" said Proctor with smiling contempt.

"Yes, here on Golden Astrobe," said Kingmaker with affection. "Foreman says the other worlds all died, and in a sense he is right. This is the world that must not die. We: are-and I do mean to be flowery-the third and possibly, last chance of mankind. Foreman uses another count than mine and I am never sure that we mean the same thing, but I know what I mean.

Another failure will finish us. If we die here, that is the end of everything.

Our contrivances the machines, which say that they will succeed us, can save neither themselves nor us. We have walked the fine line too long and it almost disappears.

"How have we failed? For five hundred years everything: went right. We had success safe in our two hands."

"And dropped it," said Foreman. "In twenty years everything has come apart."

They were all cool, considering the howling menace outside, and now perhaps within. But they had to pause for a: moment when the noise completely overwhelmed them with its waves.

"I'm puzzled," Kingmaker said when it was possible to be heard again.

"For days at a time the killers don't bother about you Foreman. And then they go wild to get at you, as now. I believe they'll have your life this time."

"For days at a time I am not clear in my own thinking," Foreman stated.

"Today I am, and they sense what it is. But they're mistaken in my motives.

Nobody has the welfare of Astrobe so much at heart as myself."

"We've had the sensor machines run a few logs on you, Foreman,"

Kingmaker said heavily. "It's certain that you'll be murdered. Today, I believe. Your logs say within the next several months at the most. You will be literally torn topieces, Foreman, your body dismembered. What fury but that of the mechanical killers could tear you apart as your logs indicate?"

"I suspect another such fury building up, Kingmaker. It will upset all my personal plans severely if I'm murdered today. I'll need the several months that my logs give me as possible."

"Why did you have us meet you here, Fabian?" Proctor asked. "There are many stronger places where you could be better protected."

"This building has some curiosities of design that I had put in twenty years ago. It's my own building, and I know a way out."

"You belong to the Circle of the Masters the same as Kingmaker and I do," Proctor said. "You have as much to do with the programming as does anyone, and you understand it better than either of us. If something is wrong with the programming of the mechanical killers, then fix it. Certainly they should not attempt to kill you. They're programmed only to kill those who would interfere with the Astrobe dream."

"And by definition all members of the Circle of Masters are utterly devoted to the Astrobean dream, and are all of one mind. But even we three aren't of one mind. Kingmaker wants to continue the living death of Astrobe at all

cost. You, Proctor, do not believe that there is anything very wrong with Astrobe; but I believe there is something very wrong with you.

You are both attached in your own way to the present sickness. I want a death and resurrection of the thing, and the mechanical killers do not understand this."

Rending and screaming of metal! A crash deep beneath them that echoed through the floor.

"The building is going down," Kingmaker said. "We have only minutes.

We must agree on our candidate for World President."

"We don't necessarily want a great man or even a good man," Proctor said. "We want a man who can serve as a catchy symbol, a man who can be manipulated by us."

"I want a good man," Kingmaker insisted.

"I want a great man," Foreman cried, "and we've come to believe that great men are nothing but myths. Let's get one anyhow! A myth-man will satisfy Proctor, and it will do no harm if he 's a good man also:"

"Here is my list of possibilities," Kingmaker said, and began to read.

"Wendt? Esposito? Chu? Foxx? Doane?" He paused and looked at the other two after each name, and they avoided his eyes. "Chezem? Byerly?

Treva? Pottscamp?"

"We're not sure that Pottscamp belongs to the Center Party," Foreman objected. "We're not even sure that he's a man. With most of them you can tell, but he's like quicksilver."

"Emmanuel? Carby? Haddad? Dobowski? Lee?" Kingmaker continued.

"Do you not think that one of them by some possibility? No, I see that you don't. Are these really the best men in the party? The best men on Astrobe?"

"I'm afraid they are, Cosmos," Foreman said. "We're stuck fast."

There was a rending crash rising above the ocean of noise, and one of the mechanical killers splintered the upper part of an interior door to the room and came through it, head and thorax. It contorted its ogre face and gathered to heave itself through. Then came something almost too swift to follow.

With a blindingly swift flick of a hand knife Proctor struck the killer where the thorax emerges from the loriea. He killed it or demobilized it.

Proctor often showed this incredible speed of motion which seemed beyond the human. The mechanical killer dangled there, the upper part of him through the broken door. The thing had a purplish nightmarish ogre appearance designed to fright.

Kingmaker and Foreman were both shaking, but Proctor remained cool.

"He was alone," Proctor said. "They go in patrols of nine, and the other eight of his group are still howling in the hallway above. I can keep track of the things. Two other patrols have now entered the building, but they blunder around. All deliberate speed nowl We can't have more than two minutes left with all possible luck. Back to our business!

"We know the next step. By recent decree all Earth Citizens are also Citizens of Astrobe. That doesn't necessarily make them better, but there's a psychological advantage in reaching out for a man. It's true that Earth has shrunken in importance-but shrinking produces an unevenness; it thrusts up mountains the while it creates low places. There are new outstanding men on Earth even though the level has fallen dismally. How about Hunaker? Rain? Oberg? Yes, I know they sound almost as dismal as do the leaders of Astrobe. Quillian? Paris? Fine?"

"We're in a blind maze of midget men," Kingmaker said. "There are no real leaders. It's become all automatic. Let's go the whole way, then. The Programmed Persons propose once more that they manufacture the perfect candidate and that all parties endorse him. I'm tempted to go with them."

"We've been there before," Foreman protested. "It didn't work then, and it won't work now. The old-recension humans simply aren't ready to accept a mechanical man as world president. Remember, that's how Northprophet had his being. They fabricated him, some years ago, to be the perfect leader. And so he would have been-from their viewpoint. And, according to rumor, that is the origin of Pottscamp also. No, it's a human leader that we need. We must keep the balance of a human for president and a mechanical for surrogate president. A mechanical man can't stop the doom clock from striking on us. He's part of the clock."

"There's one other field of search," Kingmaker came in as if on cue. If he hadn't, Foreman would have had to suggest it himself, and that would have taken the edge off it. "We need not limit ourselves to men now living.

Chronometanastasis has been a working thing for a dozen years. Find a dead man who once led well. Let him lead again. It will catch the fancy of the people, especially if they guess it themselves and are not told it outright.

There's a bit of mystery attached to a man who has been dead.

"But the dead of Astrobe will not do. A man doesn't get hoary enough in five hundred years. Let's go back to Earth for a really big man, or one who can be presented as really big. How about Plato?"

"Too cold, too placid," said Foreman. "He was the first and greatest of them, but actually he was a programmed person himself-no matter that he designed the program. He wrote once that a just man can never be unhappy. I want a man who can be unhappy over an unjust situation. Have you suggestions for dead Earth-men, Proctor?"

"For the sake of formality, yes. King Yu. Mung K'o. Chandragupta.

Stilicho. Charles the Great. Cosimo I. Macchiavelli. Edward Coke.

Gustavas Vasa. Lincoln. Inigo Jones. They'd make an interesting bunch and I'd like to meet every one of them. And yet, for our purpose, there is a little something lacking in each."

"They are men who are almost good enough," said Kingmaker. "We already have plenty of men who are almost good enough. Have you a list, Foreman?"

"Yes." Foreman took a folded paper from his pocket. He made a great show of unfolding it and smoothing it out; he cleared his throat.

"Thomas More," he read.

He folded the paper again and put it back in his pocket.

"That's right," he said. "Only one name on my list. He had one completely honest moment right at the end. I can't think of anyone else who ever had one."

"He did lose his head once in a time of crisis," Proctor jibed.

"I believe he can handle it," Foreman said. "All that's required is a mustard seed."

"Lay off it, you damned riddle maker," Kingmaker growled sharply. "We have to hurry. It's your life they are after this day, Fabian. Yes, he'll make a nice novelty, and he'll be presentable. I could say a dozen things against his selection. I could say twice as many against any other candidate we might propose. Shall we?"

They all nodded together.

"Send for him!" Kingmaker smote his chair with finality. "Will you handle it, Foreman?"

"If I live through the next five minutes I will handle it. If not, then one of you do it. Out now, you two! The killers will not touch you at all! And if I slip them this day they may not bother me again for a week. The violence of their reaction to me comes and goes. Out with you! How handy! The wall opens to give you way!"

The shattered wall did open. Kingmaker and Proctor were out, and the mechanical killers were in with a surge. Foreman stood and trembled as the

walls staggered and the whole undermined building collapsed. Then it was so murky that neither eyes nor sensors could make it out. The second and third stories came down on the first, the debris exploded inward, the killers, ten patrols of them, went through its stones and beams gnashing for flesh, and they covered the place completely.

It was his own building, Foreman had said, and he knew a way out.

2. MY GRAVE, AND I IN IT

THE PILOT chosen by Fabian Foreman to bring Thomas More from Earth to Astrobe was named Paul. Paul was two meters of walking irony, a long, strong, swift man, and short of speech. His voice was much softer than would be expected from his appearance, and had only a slight rough edge to it. What seemed to be a perpetual crooked grin was partly the scar of an old fight. He was a compassionate man with a cruel and crooked face.

From his height, his rough red hair and ruddy face, and his glittering eyes he was sometimes called The Beacon.

For a record of irregular doings, classified as criminal, Paul had had his surname and his citizenship taken away from him. Such a person loses all protection and sanction. He is at the mercy of the Programmed Persons and their Killers, and mercy was never programmed into them.

The Programmed Killers are inhibited from killing a human citizen of Astrobe, though often they do so by contrived accident. But an offender who has had his citizenship withdrawn is prey to them. He has to be very smart to survive, and Paul had survived for a year. For that long he had evaded the remorseless stiff-gaited Killers who follow their game relentlessly with their peculiar stride. Paul had lived as a poor man in the Barrio, and in the ten thousand kilometers of alleys in Cathead. He had been running and hiding for a year, and quite a bit of money had been bet on him.

There is always interest in seeing how long these condemned can find a way to live under their peculiar sentence, and Paul had lived with it longer than any of them could remember. And he was ahead of those stiff killers.

He had killed a dozen of them in their brushes, and not one of them had ever killed him.

An ansel named Rimrock, an acquaintance of both of them, had got in touch with Paul for Fabian Foreman. And Paul arrived now, remarkably uncowed by his term as fugitive. He arrived quite early in the morning, and he already had an idea from the ansel of what the mission was.

"You sent for me, Hawk-Face?" he asked Foreman. "I'm an irregular man. Why should you send me on a mission? Send a qualified citizen pilot, and keep yourself clean."

"We want a man capable of irregular doings, Paul," Foreman said.

"You've been hunted, and you've become smart. There will be danger.

There shouldn't be, since this was decided on by the Inner Circle of the Masters, but there will be."

"What's in it for me?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. You've been living in the meanest circumstances on the planet. You are intelligent. You must have seen what is wrong with Astrobe."

"No, I don't know what is wrong with our world, Inner Circle Foreman, nor how to set it right. I know that things are very wrong; and that those who use words to mean their opposites are delighted about the whole thing.

You yourself are a great deal in the company of the subverters. I don't trust you a lot. But you are hunted by the killers. You slipped them yesterday by a fox trick that nobody understands, so you enter the legendary of the high hunted. There must be something right about a man they hate so much."

"We are trying to find a new sort of leader who can slow, even reverse, the break-up, Paul. We've selected a man from the Earth Past, Thomas More. We will present him to the people only as the Thomas, or perhaps, to be more fanciful, as the Past Master. You know of him?"

"Yes, I know him as to time and place and reputation."

"Will you go and get him?"

"All right. I'll be back with him in two months," Paul said. And he started to leave the room.

"Wait, you red-headed fool!" Foreman ordered sharply. "You are a man of intelligence? What sort of oaf have I settled onto here? I haven't briefed you, I haven't given you any details at all yet. How will you-?"

"Don't give it a thought, grand Foreman," Paul said. He had a crooked mean grin on his face. How was Foreman to know that the grin was the scar of an old fight and that Paul's expression could never change much? "I said I'd do it, Foreman. I'll do it."

"But what will you go in? How-?"

"I'll steal your own craft, of course. I nearly stole it once before. I'd rather have it than Kingmaker's flying palace. There isn't a finer small craft to be had, and there isn't a man I'd rather steal from than you. And I have to leave in such sudden fashion if I'm to leave alive."

"But I will have to set up contacts for you."

"I know your Earth contacts, and I know those of Cosmos Kingmaker. In fact, I have conned several of them in the past in my record of irregular doings. I'm a competent pilot in both mediums, time and space. I must leave at once or there will be some leak to it. I'm no good to either of us dead."

"But I will have to get you off Astrobe alive. You're still a marked prey for the Programmed Killers."

"I'd die of your kindness, Foreman. I'll get off alive in my own way."

"But you must have some questions?"

"None. I can find London on Old Earth. I can find A Thousand Years Ago.

I can locate a well-known man there. I can bring him back if he wants to come. And I can make him want to come."

Paul strolled out, leaped into Foreman's grasshopper which stood in the open entry hall, and jammed the identification counterpart on it. Then he took flight. The grasshopper, of course, emitted the Stolen signal as it flew, and all Foreman's keying of permission could not override that signal.

"Why did I ever listen to an ansel and select a wild man like that?"

Foreman moaned to himself. "Ten seconds on the mission, and he's done everything wrong. He'll have every guard at spaceport on him, and they'll kill him before I can explain. Why did the ruddy fool jam the counterpart?"

Within seconds Paul came to spaceport in the grasshopper; and in the same short seconds, three groups had gathered to deal with him variously.

One group, however, had known of Paul's sudden impulsive action some hours before.

Paul was thinking rapidly in this, but he also had a friend who was feeding things into his mind. Paul knew that it is sometimes better to have two groups than one in pursuit of you. If you can get the bears and the hounds to close in on you from opposite directions at the same time, somebody is likely to get mauled. Luck holding, it may be the bears and the hounds.

Having a few bear-baiters and hound-baiters in ambush ready to take a hand may also help.

The bears were the spaceport guards, huge and lumbering, reacting to the Stolen signal of the grasshopper. And the bears got there first, too fast, or the hounds were too slow. They dragged Paul out of the grasshopper with their grapples, and he knew that they were about the business of killing him. One of them shagged him a bloody swipe that took skin and deep flesh off arm, shoulder, and left ribs. And one, but only one, clasped him to crush him to death. But the primary aim of these bears, these mechanical guards, was to secure the stolen vehicle and clear the status of it. Killing Paul was only a secondary aim.

"Timing not right," rattled through Paul's head in what seemed his last moment. "Other killers too late. Never was anything late about them before." He was crushed too tight to talk, almost too tight to think. With the grip that the thing had on him, he would never breathe in another breath.

But he fought mightily with the iron bear, unwilling to give death an unearned advantage.

The hounds were the Programmed Killers, the same who had been haunting Paul for a year. Stiff and bristling, they now reacted to a frantic signal in their own sensing devices, the Escape signal sent out by Paul's actions. Their programming told them that their prey, the Paul Person, was attempting an off-world escape from them, and that it was urgent. They closed in on Paul for the kill blind to everything else; and the spaceport guards as blindly reacted to this sudden intrusion into their own area of investigation.

The tangle, when it came, was of blinding speed and deafening fury.

Here were two different groups of mechanical killers: one programmed for patrol, defense and counterattack, the Bears; the other programmed for stalking and direct assault, the Hounds or Hound-Cats. But a bear was crushing Paul to death, however much the strong and slippery man struggled against it.

And yet the crusher was diverted in the churning confusion. Twice it had to stop to smash gnashing metal hounds into mechanical death and disarray. Every device there had one or more alarms or sirens or hooters going off inside him, and the signals did not make for clarity.

Then was the maddening clash and jangle as the third force entered.

Paul felt it in his brain, and both sorts of mechanicals felt it in their Bell-cells.

And there was a direct command in Paul's brain: "Breathe, dammit!" So he took one more great breath, having been loosened for the meriest instant.

He was too far gone to have known to breathe without being told.

But this third assault was a human one, more or less. The voice in Paul's brain was that of Rimrock the ansel. Whether Rimrock could be called human or not, he was associated with humans. Now Paul also heard the voice of Walter Copperhead, the necromancer who could spook the matrix out of the mechanicals and confuse their programming completely.

Paul heard other voices, and he was able to get another breath.

Paul was not dead. He refused to die. His crushing iron bear had had to loose him completely to smash down three of the mechanical hound-cats at once. And the sudden men were in it now. Battersea was as tall a man as Paul and twice as thick. He swung a battleaxe that weighed as much as an ordinary man, and he knew where were located the nexus and centers of every sort of mechanical. He'd battered them to death before. Shanty was near as huge a man as Battersea, and was faster. Copperhead's powers included the power to disable and kill, and Rimrock the ansel, of that most gentle species, had nevertheless slicers three feet long.

Others were there. There was Slider, but Slider had never been sure which side he was on. And Paul himself was into the battle now. He had a long stabber up from a sheath at big loins; and Paul also knew a little bit about how these contrivances were put together. On many of them, an upthrust below the base of the third center plate will sever communications in the mechanical and leave it helpless; and it was there that Paul thrust.

He got it; his thrust severed communications and life; it was a man and not a mechanical that he battled that time, and Paul killed him. A man masquerading as a Programmed Killer! So there were, the more to confuse the event, human men on both sides.

"The time is now!" the voice of Rimrock the ansel shrilled in Paul's brains, and yet the silent Rimrock was battling one of the iron bears and seemed not even aware of Paul's location. But Rimrock was a devious fellow.

Paul, free again for a moment, bounded like a springbuck and was into Foreman's spacecraft. Foreman had keyed permission, and the identification

counterpart had not been jammed on this. Paul was in sudden flight.

Well, it had been a curious and bitter battle, quite brief and quite deadly.

At least two humans had been killed, and half a dozen mechanicals. And the battle will have to explain itself as it goes along, for it is not over. It is to be fought again and again in its variations.

But Paul was free and in flight - painfully swiped and giddy from loss of blood, but in flight beyond pursuit. The Programmed Killers had Paul on their death list as an enemy of the Astrobe Ideal; and yet he was now on mission for the three big men, the Inner Circle of the Masters, who were supposed to be the mainstays of that ideal.

Paul had been whistling happily, whenever he had the breath for it, during the whole confused battle in which he had killed a man and demolished a Programmed Person. He was still whistling happily when he was in flight in Foreman's spacecraft; and none of those in the melee (except the ansel) had any idea what he was about. And he still whistled when he was in Hopp-Equation Space.

It breaks here. It isn't like other space. And persons and things in it aren't the same persons and things they were before.

Astrobe is about a parsec and a half from Earth. Going at light speed it would take more than five years to make the trip. But by Hopp-Equation Travel, it could be made in one Astrobe month, a little less than one Earth month, about seven hundred standard hours.

Paul's craft would disappear as it traversed the parsec and a half to Earth. But, to the pilot who made the run, it was the rest of the universe that disappeared. To him there was no motion, no worlds or stars-really no sense of duration, or of time in passage.

Odd things happened to pilots and passengers during Hopp-Equation travel. During the period of cosmic disappearances, Paul always became left-handed. In addition, there was always an absolutely fundamental reversal in him. He knew from the private jokes of other pilots that this total reversal

happened to them also. There was more sniggering about this than about anything else in space lore, for Hopp Equation travel was very new. But it happened, it happened every time: the total reversal of polarity in a person. Man, what a reversal in polarity!

"Oh well, it's the only way I could ever sing soprano," Paul would say; and he often did so when in this state.

Paul would cat-nap on the trip, but his state of sleep would register on the craft's instrumentation, and he was not permitted to sleep beyond ninety seconds at one time. He became adept at this, however. Very intricate dreams can be experienced in ninety seconds.

Paul calculated that he had at least twenty thousand of these memorable dreams during the passage. Each was gemlike, self-contained, perfectly timed, widely different from any other. Each was a short life of its own, many of them with large sets of characters and multitudinous happenings, some completely gentle, some nostalgic for things never known before but clearly remembered, some sheer horror beyond the ride of any nightmare. The Law of Conservation of Psychic Totality will not be abridged. There were four and a half years of psychic awareness to be compressed into one month, and it forced its compression into these intense and rapid dreams.

There is a great lot of psychic space debris, and when one enters its area on Hopp-Equation flight one experiences it. Every poignant thing that ever happened, every comic or horrifying or exalting episode that ever took place, is still drifting somewhere in space. One runs into fragments (and concentrations) of billions of minds there; it is never lost, it is only spread out thin.

The ansel was in many of the dreams. These creatures are psychically remarkable; they were in the human unconscious before they were found on Astrobe.

There were flashes, in and around Paul's dreams, of his year of escapes, and of the most recent escape at spaceport. Paul was never terrified in moments of danger. His terror came later, in dream form, and a lot of it communicated itself on this passage. The several persons and mechanisms

who had died in that last episode were in several of the dreams; persons who have just died are also psychically remarkable.

Paul had many dreams of a boy named Adam who died cavalierly in battle again and again, and so avoided the misfortune of really growing up.

Dying was the only thing he was really good at. And he dreamed of Adam's sister, a childwitch who decided to go to Hell before she died. But Paul was not sure whether he had known these two, and others previously; whether he knew them only in these dreams; or whether he was to know them in the future. And how was it that Adam died so many times? How did he come to life so many times? "No, no," Adam explained. "It is death, it is death. I am not born again. I do not live again. It is always another of the same name."

Paul dreamed of the monster Ouden; and of his own death, when it should come, knowing that he was actually viewing it.

But it wasn't all heavy vital stuff encountered in the Passage Dreams.

Some of it was light and vital stuff. Also still drifting in deep space is every tall tale ever told.

Hey, here's one. It was of an Earthman of a few hundred years before Paul's time, John Sourwine, or Sour John. But now Paul became Sour John and he told and lived at the same time the outre tale.

Owing to the diet he had followed from his youth-alcohol, wormwood, green snails-one of Sour John's kidneys had become vitrified, and in a peculiar manner. Not only had it turned into glass, but it had turned into glass of a fine jewel-like green. This he had seen himself on the fluoroscope.

It happened that he and some friends were at Ghazikhan in what was then India of Old Earth, and they looked at the great idol there. They were told that the center eye of the idol, an emerald nearly a foot in diameter, was worth eleven million dollars. Sour John went back to his ship and thought about it.

"Ghazikhan is not a sea-port," Paul interrupted his dream, for he had acquired Old Earth information by psychteacher machine long ago. "Either get on or get off," said Sour John, Paul's other self for the moment. "I say it is a sea-port." Paul (Sour John) went back to his ship and thought about it.

He had always meant to acquire expensive habits, and he could use eleven million dollars. He sharpened up an old harpoon, called the ship's boy to help him, and in no time at all they had that kidney out. They trimmed it down a little, put it to a lathe and then a buffer and one thing and another, and soon they had it shined up to perfection. It was the most beautiful kidney in the world.

Then Paul went back to the town, climbed up the idol at midnight (it was five hundred feet high and sheer and slick as ice); he pried out the emerald eye and substituted the green kidney. It fit perfectly. "I knew it would," said Paul. Then he climbed down, a descent that not another man in the world would dare to make, and went back to his ship with the emerald. He sold it in Karachi for eleven million dollars, and he lived high for a while. But owing to his only having one kidney, Paul was now unable to drink water at all.

Three years later Paul (Sour John) was back in Ghazikhan. He was told that the center eye of the idol had been reappraised. By a miracle it had changed, the people said. It had become richer in color, finer in texture, of a deeper brilliance; and a grand new aroma came from it. And now it was worth thirteen million dollars. "I figure I lost two million dollars on the deal,"

Paul said as he woke up.

Ninety seconds; how could that be? The climb up the idol had taken two hours at least. Somebody asks what sort of man was this Paul with the permanent crooked grin? He was the sort of man who was visited by a passage dream of a vitrified kidney.

Twenty thousand of such little dreamsl Hey, here's another one!

Paul was coursing at fantastic speed towards the area where the little twin stars Rhium and Antirhium revolved around each other. "Hurry," were his instructions; "they seem of no consequence, but they are the governor of the universe. Somebody is tampering with them." Paul continued at his impossible speed and arrived at the area. He saw something that nobody had ever seen before, for nobody had ever been so close to them. The two small stars that revolved around each other were, joined together by a long steel chain. It was that which held them in their tight rapid orbits; it was that which made them the governor of the universe. Paul quickly located the trouble. There was a small green creature, with the body of a monkey and the head of a gargoyle, cutting the chain with a hack-saw, and he had it near cut in two. "Pray that I be not too late!" Paul prayed, and he believed he had made it when the sawyer broke a blade. But he quickly replaced it with another, stuck his green tongue out at Paul, took three more strokes with the hack-saw, and the chain broke. Then Rhium and Antirhium swung out of their tight orbits, and the whole universe was out of control with its governor broken. Fifty billion billion stars went nova, and then blacked out to nothing. The universe had eaten itself and was gone forever. "I told you to hurry!" the space captain told Paul furiously as he came barreling up.

Then the space captain's face melted like wax and he was gone. "I did hurry," Paul said. Then his own face melted like wax and he was gone also.

"Is it quite finished?" came the voice of old hawk-face Fabian Foreman.

"If it is quite finished, then perhaps we can begin to construct a new universe. It's all right. It worked out well. I meant you to be too late."

Ninety seconds long, Twenty thousand of them, each one so different.

Oddly, it is only the maladjusted who are able to stand the passages.

The well-adjusted pilot cracks up on such a solo trip. That is why all Hopp-Equation pilots are of a peculiar breed.

Paul knew that some of the monsters he encountered in the passage dreams were real. They were the weird creatures who live in Hopp-Equation space. Some of them were encountered by Paul only; but others were experienced

by pilot after pilot in the same episode in the same part of space. It was delirium. Nearly five years of psychic experience must be crowded into one month. The psychic mass of experience is not foreshortened.

From Golden Astrobe to Blue Earth. Earth is always bluish to one coming from Astrobe. Astrobe always seems gold to one coming from Earth. It is that the whites of their two suns are not the same white. White is not an absolute. It is the composite of the colors where you live.

Paul made Earth-fall, taking it from the morning side, a beautiful experience that never gets old.

He came down in London and stabled his craft. He took with him a small but weighty instrument, and went to the London office of Cosmos Kingmaker. That richest man on Astrobe had vast interests on Earth also; and Paul knew his way around on both worlds.

Brooks was in charge of Kingmaker's London office, and Brooks was immediately flustered by a visit from a man of Astrobe. Most Earthmen are flustered and inferior towards men of Astrobe, feeling themselves left behind and of less consequence. When most of the small but vital elite had gone from Earth to Astrobe four or five hundred years before, it had made a difference that was never erased. Earth really was inferior and of less consequence now.

Paul presented Brooks with credentials and directives from Kingmaker, and Brooks accepted them. Paul had forged them during the passage, though he could have gotten real ones from Kingmaker himself or through Foreman. Paul liked to do things on his own.

"You do not give me much information, and I do not ask much," Brooks said. "I have heard of you vaguely. I know that you have been in trouble on both worlds. Well, I respect the buccaneer in a man; it has almost gone out of us. My master Kingmaker has employed such men before, and it is not for me to question it. Here is the basic machine. I could calibrate an attachment for any period you wish, but you seem to have brought your own attachment."

"Oh, there's no great secrecy, Brooks. I've come for a man, and I'll probably leave with him again tomorrow. It isn't necessary that you know the exact calibration, though it would be no great harm if you guessed it."

"Here's coin of the period as my brief here requires me to supply to you.

I wish you hadn't requisitioned so much of it. It will strap me. It goes much further than you would imagine. The multiplier is something like fifty to one."

And Paul was fingering the old gold coins around on a little table there.

"Here, I can use less than one in four of these," he said. "I give the rest of them back to you, Brooks; they are minted a very few years too late for my purpose; they might embarrass me. The men where I am going would be suspicious of Tomorrow Coins. I know the multiplier, and the former and present value. The remaining sum will be about right."

"Will you come out in Chelsea, messenger Paul?"

"In Chelsea you ask? You guess shrewdly, for an Earthman. No, I will go in here and come out here."

"Chelsea at that time was not a part of London. It was some miles in the country."

"The distance was the same then as now. I may find my man in London on business or I may find him at his home in Chelsea."

Paul stepped through the tuned antenna-like loop, and to Brooks it was as though the man had disappeared into the crackling air. To Paul it was going through an unholy gray confusion that is deeper than darkness. And he was sick, as are all who follow the time travel.

Paul came out ankle-deep in mud. He was on the edge of a big sprawling wooden town. He went into a ramshackle public house, ordered and ate wood-cock, some very high beef, barley bread, and an onion the size of a child's head; and he talked to the proprietor.

"Could you tell me whether Thomas More is in the city, or home in Chelsea?" he asked the man, being careful to give the old pronunciation of words as well as he could.

"Likely at home," the man said. "He's out of favor with the King now, you know. You are a solicitor?"

"Yes, I solicit," Paul said.

"You've an odd sound to your talk," the man told him. "You are from the North?"

"No, from the South," Paul told him. That was true. Astrobe, from Earth viewpoint, was in the Southern Celestial Hemisphere.

"It's dangerous to talk to strangers these days," the man said, "but I was never one to be intimidated. The old things are passing away, and I hate to see them go. I don't like the new things that are brewing. But I do like Thomas More, though doubting that he'll be long in the land of the living.

Mother of Christ, I hope someone can persuade him to leave the country before it's too late! I believe that you are one of them from across the channel."

"Yes, I'm from across the channel," Paul said, "and I'll take him out of the country if he'll go with me. Do not mention our conversation, and I will not."

"The King's men are everywhere, friend. Walk in Christ."

Paul went out again. It was a cold day. He knew the way, and he followed the road to Chelsea in Middlesex. He was pleased to discover that the English had not yet become "that most unhandsome of people."

There wasn't much trouble with the language back in this period-a few little tricks to remember, no more. An hour or two of crisp walking on the road, and Paul was to Chelsea. He asked but once, and then he spotted his man, walking in his frozen garden and wrapped up like a sheep.

How did Paul know him for sure? Well, he looked a little like the Thomas More of Holbein's portrait which Paul had studied, but only a little. All portraits by Holbein look more like Holbein than like their subjects. But Thomas More was a man who would always be recognized.

"I am Paul," said Paul as he walked up to him, "and after that I hardly know what to say."

"Your name-saint also traveled far, Paul," Thomas More said with easy friendliness. "Not so far as you have, of course, but perhaps to higher purposes. But I salute you, as a man coming through both mediums, which I do nowt understand."

Paul had gone back a thousand years and he and Thomas could understand each other. But Thomas couldn't have understood his own great-grandfather. It goes by jumps, and it had changed much more in the hundred years just past than in the thousand years to follow. It is true that Thomas said nowt for not; that he pronounced of as though it were spelled of and not uv; that he sounded the plural s as though it were an s and not a z.

"I don't understand it either," Paul said. "But how could you know that I have come through both mediums?"

"You've the aspect of one of them," Thomas said. "I've been visited through time before. I'm not a great man, but I'm one who has aroused curiosity in History. Where are you from, Paul?"

"From Astrobe, of which you have never heard."

"Lay no bets on that, Paul. I've a number of past and future things in my head. Once I believed that travel through time was unnatural. But we all travel through time every moment of our lives. It is only that you have traveled at a different rate and in a different direction. Are all on your world as tall as you?"

Thomas had a touch of the things that would later called the Irish brogue and the Scotch burr, but they were in the English of this time.

"No. The average is about a half a foot shorter than myself-about a half a foot taller than yourself," Paul said. "To us you are a short and chunky man, and you have allowed yourself to appear old: I assume it is your natural appearance unmodified. But I'm more and more puzzled you should guess me so accurately."

"I didn't get the name of being the best lawyer in Europe without being able to appraise a man," Thomas said. "And you are not unique. I told you that I had been visited through time before. By a curiosity of History I am to have a certain fame. The circumstances of it bewilder me as they have been explained to me by another traveler. I do nowt at all understand what is to happen to me within the next year. Other men have been visited from the future, I'm sure; but they're no more likely to publish the fact than I am.

Incredulity is a fang that bites deep. I understand that I am to make, and only a few weeks from now, a decision so foolhardy on the surface of it as hardly to be believed. Visitors have come and asked me why I did it, and I can't tell them at all. You see, I haven't done it yet. The point for which I am to lose my head seems to me to be a trivial one, not worth the loss of a head, certainly not worth the loss of mine. Why have you visited me from Asternick, Paul?"

"From Astrobe. We are in trouble on Astrobe. They are looking for a candidate to lead them out of a hopeless tangle there. They have tried almost every other sort of man; now they want to try an honest man. They considered the Name Men, living and dead, of the two worlds. You were the only completely honest man they could discover-or the only man with one completely honest moment."

"Oh, it was-will be-quite a showy act of honesty for which I will lose my head, Paul. But I can't conceive of myself doing it. I haven't been particularly honest up to this point of my life. Opportune rather. But if I were honest, or if I am to be so in the climax moment of my life, how will that help you on Astrobe in the future?"

"I've come to take you back to Astrobe with me."

"You want to take me forward in time with you, Paul? That's impossible, of course. We must live out our lives in our own times and places according to the fate laid out for us. We cannot tamper with the course of History."

"A little of the shine flaked off you then, Thomas. It's only a plating, is it, and not the deep thing? Thomas, that was a silly string of commonplace for an uncommon man to utter. And, as a Christian man, you can hardly accept fate."

"You would make a fine lawyer yourself, Paul. No, I never paid obeisance to Fate. And I have just enough natural truculence in me to do it.

But I hate to leave my family."

"Thomas, Thomas, are you lacking in curiosity? In imagination? In daring? They have called you a forerunner, a man open to new ideas. And possibly you will not be leaving your family. History records that you died on a certain date in an extreme manner, and in this realm."

"Will there be two of me, then, Paul? But of course there are two of me, and more. Every man is a multitude; but I play with words. Why do you really need me?"

"I have told it. It is because our world is sick."

"And you are looking for a gaudy cure? You are looking for a Doctor snatched from the Past? I have failed to cure a sick world here, Paul, and I have watched its sickness growing all my life. It was not even a successful doctor in his own time that you are come for. I was the High Chancellor Doctor; and the patient has thrown me out of the house."

"Those who decide such things have decided that you are the man we need."

"It isn't that I haven't studied the subject, Paul. I once wrote an account of as sick a world as I could imagine. You see, my second claim to fame is that I coined the word and the idea Utopia. I wrote in bitter and laughing irony of

that sickest of all possible worlds, that into which my own world seems to be turning.

"But here is an odd thing, Paul. I am told by time travelers that my angry humor piece has always been misunderstood. It came to be believed that I wrote of an ideal world., It even came to be believed that I wrote with a straight face. My mind boggles at the very idea, but I'm told that it is so.

Paul, there is something very slack about a future that will take a biting satire for a vapid dream."

"Will you come back with me?"

"Not to any Astrobe, no, Paul. I can't help you or yours, you red-headed ogre. I like you, man. There's something pleasant about a really ugly man, and we both qualify. But I can't go with you. I will try to explain.

"I have asked questions of the Time Men who came to question me, so I know a little of several futures. You live about a thousand years from now, at my guess, at the time of the First Astrobian Time of Troubles; and Astrobe in your time is in wobbly shape. But a thousand years after you are dead, Astrobe will still be in wobbly shape. It will have a different wobble then, however. Astrobe will have long since survived the crisis that worries you now."

"A crisis is survived only by the doings of one critical man."

"I know it."

"Thomas, you are that man."

"No. I am not. It is another. I begin to recall it now. I hadn't paid too much attention to the accounts of the Other World when I was told of such; it all seemed pretty fanciful. His name, his name, I wish I could remember his name."

"So do I, Thomas. You would surely recognize your own, if you were presented under it."

"The man who brought Astrobe out of its first time of troubles, and in so left-handed a manner, his name, it will come to me, Paul, that man was quite in the heroic mold, and I am not. That man, after he had been shamefully put to de- Jerusalem irredentada! It cannot be! The name of that man, Paul-miserere mihi Domine!-his name isn't known. Always he is identified only as the Past Master. It's a startling thought. You believe him to be me?"

"Yes. I'm sure now, Thomas. You've told me something that isn't known to them there yet They're still searching for a name to present you under.

`Past Master' is one of those they are considering, but they won't decide till they see you. `Past Master' it will be, then. The Master out of the past is yourself, Thomas."

"Paul, you also have been pursued for your life, as I have been lately. I know the look of a hunted man, even a defiant one. Surely there are not King's Men on Astrobe who hunt down and kill."

"No, they are different, Thomas. They are Programmed Mechanical Killers."

"No, they are the same, Paul. King's Men everywhere are programmed mechanical killers. But I see that I will have to discover for myself the name of the real king of Astrobe. Yes, I'll go. Stay the night. I'll go with you in the morning."

"Thomas, what happened, what is happening to your own world?" Paul asked as they talked together that night. "You built it according to an ideal of high perfection, but it started to come apart a hundred years before this time. Your world is at an end, and another one, in some ways much worse, is beginning. What goes wrong with your world, Thomas?"

"We built it too small, Paul, we built it too small. And what is really wrong with Astrobe? Can you not give me the name of it? It helps to know the name of your opponent."

"It's name is the monster Ouden, the open mouth of Ouden, of whom you have not heard."

"I'm an educated man, Paul, in my own opinion at least. I'm one of the handful of men who brought Greek back to Western Europe. History should remember that much of me. And Ouden means nothingness."

"That's the name of him, Thomas, and he has his growing legions."

They burned oak and pitch-pine and yew in the open fire, and drank a little of the native. In that century England still had a wine of its own.

They were up early in the morning. Thomas More, about to start on a strange journey, went to be shriven. "I believe only in spurts now, Paul," he said. "My faith is weak. Is it not ironic that I will die for it in the near future?

And that those of strong faith will hide and be silent?"

Paul went with Thomas and did likewise, perhaps the first man to be absolved of sins a thousand years before he committed them.

They went to London afterwards. They went through the tunnel loop and came out in Kingmaker's London office, where Brooks was sleeping on a sofa. He wakened and recognized Thomas at once.

"I'd guessed it was he you came to take, Paul," he said. "I'd rather you took the crown jewels or the Seal or the Charter. If his bones are no longer with us, then we are not the same man."

"Let's go see, Paul," Thomas said. "A man owes himself that much curiosity."

They went to the old church of St. Peter in Chains. "You are buried here," Paul said. "The church is a reconstruction, but the graves underneath are still there."

An old priest came to them there.

"Do the bones of Thomas More for certain lie below?" Thomas asked the old priest.

"They do. This very year we opened several of the graves. The bones of Thomas More are there, and on one finger bone is the famous signet ring of which you wear a replica on your own finger. You are an antiquarian."

"No, I'm an antiquary," Thomas said. "I have a special interest in this man. What other man, Paul, looks down on his own grave and he in it? All except my head. I'm told that it's buried at Canterbury. Parboiled it, did they not? I'd like to see it, but I suspect that it's too long a journey."

They were going on a journey of a parsec and a half, but seventy miles was too long a journey.

As they strolled about London, Paul realized that this man Thomas would never be an anachronism, either on Earth or on Astrobe. Thomas was already onto the new pronunciation of the language-to the point of burlesquing it. He was at home, too much at home, in this latter world. He did everything directly, and as his right. He got into a fist fight with a bulky young man in a drinking place.

Thomas won the fight, too, but Paul saw fit to chide him about it.

"Remember, Thomas, you were sainted after you were dead," Paul told him. "Saints do not indulge in barroom brawls."

"Some do, Paul, some don't," Thomas maintained, wiping blood off his peculiar nose. Whatever happened to that nose wouldn't matter much; it wasn't a pretty one, but it had a lot of character. "Several men of my acquaintance were later sainted, so I've been told. One of them was a withdrawn man who didn't brawl. One of them was too puny for it. But the third of them did indulge in just such brawls. I've seen him."

And this reminded Thomas of something else. "One thing I forgot to ask, Paul. How is the fishing on Astrobe? You are silent, Paul. I can still withdraw from this adventure, you know. Answer me, man."

"I am trying to contain myself, Thomas. You will not believe it until you see it. It is one of the great things that have remained great."

"You mean it, Paul? You can go out any afternoon and take a string of them?"

"A string of them? Thomas, you talk like a boy. How can you string fish that are as long as a man? On Astrobe, if you go out in a boat for any purpose other than angling, the fish will rise to the surface about you and howl for the hook."

"I am glad, Paul, that the new-day fishermen have not suffered any shortening of the tongue. That is what really worried me."

They went to Sky-Port and entered their craft for Astrobe, Thomas with an armful of mystery novels, revels, bonanzas, and science fiction books, all new things to him. Thomas had also discovered tobacco and he swore that the stogie was the most wonderful thing in the world since the Evangels. He announced that he would smoke and read for the whole trip to Astrobe. So they enskied.

And so it went well till their first period of cosmic disappearance.

He was trying to bellow, the man Thomas, no, the creature Thomas, and his voice was no longer one to bellow with. The fundamental reversal had taken place in him as they made the Hopp-Equation trip, and Thomas seethed with a fury that he could not express.

"Does it happen to all travelers, Paul?" the Thomas finally asked in frustration.

"To all who travel by Hopp-Equation journey. The regular trip takes five years."

"What's time to a revenant? I've been dead a thousand years, that I should live to such shame," he, she, it said.

The Passage dreams again, to Paul, and now to the Thomas also.

Thousands of them, no more than a minute and a half each, incomparably vivid. In passage dream Thomas met an oceanic man named Rimrock and did not find it odd. He encountered a female creature who was at the same time Succubus, Eve, Lilith, Judith, Mary, and Valkyrie. He dreamed three quick vivid dreams of three men he had never met. One man for his moment was a spider with a lion's head. One man was a most peculiar fox.

And one man was a hawk who sat and shuffled shells at a table, and one shell was different.

These dreams sank down into the cellar of the Thomas mind, but they would come up to him again when he met those persons.

3. AT THE NAKED SAILOR

"WHY, THIS IS beyond wonder, Paul," Thomas said when they had toppled into normal space and began to orbit in to Astrobe. "It's a golden world. When I was a boy I was told that the streets of Paris were gold; or, if not they, then those of Rome, or Constantinople, or Cordova. I visited them all, and they weren't. The Spanish ambassador told me that it was so in Mexico City. I didn't get to go there, but I had long since come to my doubting years. But the whole world here is gold."

"It is the color of our sun," Paul said. "It is our white, and so it will seem to you."

They came onto firm Astrobe, dismounted, and gave the craft to the keepers. They started towards the easy rooms.

"Not that way, Red, it's a trap, it's a trapl" an ansel voice erupted in Paul's head. "To your leftl To your left quickly and find friends by the edging trees."

"Not that way, Thomas," said Paul, and they veered off their course. "We walk in this direction. Careful now. It was the voice of Rimrock the ansel in my head warning us. You wouldn't know about ansels."

"Why, certainly I know, Paul. He spoke in my own head several times during the late hours of the passage. I look forward to meeting him. But I heard no warning. Are you sure of this?"

"No. But we'll not go to the easy rooms till we are sure. We'll find what's going on over by the edging trees. Come, quickly, but carefully."

"Paul, I don't like it," Thomas said, hanging back a little.

"Don't hand me around like a boy. I know more of snares and traps than you do. The King's Men do sometimes employ the left-handed trap, and I smell the iron of it now."

Too late.

"Paul! Thomasl Away fast!" came the oceanic voice of: Rimrock in their heads. "It was not myself who spoke to you. It was another. Away!"

Too late.

Paul and Thomas were chopped down like weeds.

It was agonizingly painful darkness, blind nauseating confusion a devouring death that encompassed Paul in mind and body. It stank, it roared, it blasted, it disgusted and affrighted. A growing rumor was rising in the near distance, but too far, too late surely to save them.

Paul remarked, with his riven mind and suddenly shattered and darkened vision, and with dirt in his mouth, on how beautiful was the afterglow of the day, especially when one has just died. The double vision of the reeling, the syndrome of the split head lends itself to detachment.

Paul heard, with ears that seemed to belong to someone else, a new booming roar very near. He was amused that Thomas More, dead a thousand years, was so angrily refusing to die. There was another fellow, a long crooked sorrel-top who was making a great fuss about it also. Paul pulled the two halves of his mind back together and realized that the other fellow was himself, and that refreshing and kindling anger had flowed back

into him. It had been a new blow, one that should have crushed his skull, that rather torched off the reaction in him, canny coolness linked with white-hot anger.

"If that didn't get me, I'll be a devilish hard man to kill," he spat through the dirt in his mouth, and had already fought his way to his feet. He had hope now. He recognized the growing rumor in the ever nearer distance as the shouting of the poor lungers from Cathead, and he knew that those miserables were on his side. The lungers hated everybody, but they hated the stilted-gaited assassins most of all.

And Thomas had not stayed down when struck down. He had been up again and giving battle. There had been words in his booming roar, but they came to Paul's understanding only now:

"Front theml Front theml" Thomas shouted. "They're King's Men. They kill from behind. They go for the dorsalis, the spinal, the brain base. One who flees them is already dead. Front theml Front theml"

It was not now the original assassins only. It was a churning mob, and men and things were killing and being killed. Paul was struck another blow that drove bone splinters into his brain, but oblivion never quite closed down on him. Oblivion was like a mirage that receded so that he could not come up to it; and the confusion had multiplied mightily. Distant sounds had a mocking quality that set the conflict off as a sort of dream world. The hoot of distant slag boats calling had a terrible profundity coming over the pungent water.

One of the assassins was broken and useless. A giant lunger was killed.

And a boy named Adam was killed.

But hadn't the boy Adam been killed before? No, Adam hadn't necessarily been killed that other time. Not this time either. The boy had been killed in one of those dreams of passage, and those dreams (being out of time) could be of either past or future things.

When it came to Paul that he was being saved, it carne to him with a childish delight as though it was his right. He heard Thomas and Rimrock the ansel talking, but not in words. "It were better to hide in a den like a wounded bear and study the events and their foundations," the ansel told Thomas; and the ansel was a native of Astrobe and had never seen a bear.

"It were best to get to any low hidden place with remarkable suddenness and wait for the worse day that is sure to come," Thomas told the creature, and Thomas had a broken jaw and wouldn't be able to speak till it was wired up.

"We are only poor miserable lungers from Cathead!" cried the powerful breaking voice of Battersea to what sounded like a crowd gathering. "It is only a little scuffle among ourselves, and we carry away our own dead.

Decent people need not be concerned with it. We go quickly, and regret having intruded onto an open area."

Paul was being carried somewhere. It was easier that way. Oblivion flickered around the edges of Paul, and then closed in completely on him.

A few hours for the beginning of recovery, and Paul awoke to a great odor, a writhing of many strong odors of men and seas and things.

It smells like the Barrio, Paul told himself, and smelling seemed to be the only one of his senses that was functioning well. "Worse, it smells like Cathead. Still worse, it smells like the strip where they merge. It smells like one of the ten thousand low bordello inns in the teeming region. It smells like the worst of them all, the Naked Sailor."

Paul found that he could see, though crookedly out of an unmended head. He had been lying on hay, and he had the impression that goats had been kept in that room. He found that he could walk, though not straight as a rational man would. He staggered out of the doorless room. He walked in an angular and indirect manner through the viscera of a rambling and noisome building, past a kitchen where a madeyed girl gave him a length of strong fish twined in kelp, and he continued on his way eating it. He lurched along till he found a common room, and then another on a lower

level. He heard the voice of Thomas More. He saw that it was coming through wired jaws.

"It's a bleak back-byre we have here," Thomas said. "We'll clean it up, or we'll pull it down and burn it. What we need is a tub in the middle of the room, and dip the whole clutch of you."

Thomas was holding a sort of court there. He was a lively little runt with a clear voice and a pleasant unhandsome face. He was attended by a dozen weary ragged men who sat about on the floor and regarded him with red-rimmed eyes.

"Where in hell are we, Thomas?" Paul asked in a voice that hurt him to use. He had floating bones in his bead somewhere.

"Fourth of the seven sections, Paul," Thomas said cheerfully. "According to the Moslems, the fourth section of Hell is for Christians. Be appeased; there are three worse Hells than this. It's named the Naked Sailor."

"The Naked Sailor! Thomas, there aren't three worse Hells than this,"

Paul stated.

"Aye, man, there are," said one of the men with redrimmed eyes.

"It's a compendium, Paul," said Thomas as if he were lecturing a congregation of barons. "It gives me a vantage point to study what is wrong with your Astrobe, before I make my appearance from beyond the grave.

The Naked Sailor is itself a grave. I have ventured out three times this day, and have had three men killed defending you."

"You venture out again, man, and we kill you ourselves to save us the trouble," said another of the shot-eyed men sitting on the floor. "Ourselves, we have only a life each. You're not worth another one, old potato-face."

"There's something deformed about this whole business," Thomas said.

"These giant settlements here are pieces right out of Hell. Do you know, Paul, that there are unburied dead lying in some of the alleys? This must be the underside of this world, this world's sick delirium. Well, I'm finding what is wrong. I'll see the top side soon enough and find how right everything is there."

"Be on your guard when you do, man," said another of the weary-eyed fellows. "It is in these places here that the savor of the only things that are still right on Astrobe clings."

The Killers were milling around outside, and the air was full of sullen electricity. There was fear and anger like soot in the air. Bot-flies were spluttering and roaring about the slippery blood in the roadway outside and in the common room itself. There had been carnage, and the atmosphere spoke of more to come.

"Just what is my status?" Thomas asked. "Why should they try so persistently to kill you and me, Paul? What are these curious killers?"

"They're the guardians of the Astrobe Dream," Paul said with sad irony.

"They believe you'll see our side of the thing," one of the ragged men said. "We're not so sure that you will."

"Are these killers human beings?" Thomas asked.

"They are not," said the weariest of the men sitting there "They are devils dressed in tin cans."

"Was the ansel who talked to you without words a human being, Thomas?" Paul asked. "Would you call Rimrock a human? But you haven't seen him yet."

"I don't need to see him, Paul. He is composed of body and spirit. He has intellect. That makes him human."

"But the killers look much more human than he does. They have a calculated shrewdness that passes for intellect, and they have a human

form."

There was a clatter, a crash, a moan that was only half human, and a bleating scream that was dying animal. A poor man scampered in with three goats, a crazy man with unfocused eyes. He sat down on the floor sobbing and coughing together, and his goats gathered around him.

"Is he human, Thomas?" Paul asked.

"Certainly, though he's demented. He is a judgment upon everyone on this planet. Aren't there mad-houses for such as he?"

"In civilized Astrobe they say that all Cathead and Barrio is a mad-house.

There are two million men as mad as he, one in twelve. He isn't bad. He slavers, and he cannot: speak coherently, but he gets about. He has even avoided the killers till now. But I doubt that he'll be able to avoid them much longer, the way they are ravening about today. We may none of us avoid them. You don't like what you've seen of Cathead, what you now see and hear and smell?" Paul asked.

"No. I had no idea that such ancient vestiges of poverty, and misery could still survive on the advanced world of: Astrobe. Why weren't such things swept away long ago?"

The mad goat-man was crooning a little song. The killers were thronging and gnashing in the roads like the iron dogs they were.

"It isn't an ancient vestige," Paul said. "This is all new. Twenty years ago Astrobe was completely beautiful and civilized. Then these places appeared, like a blight, as they great ones say. I do not call them that."

"Paul, I walked for many squares through these neighborhoods in my three sorties out. There are blind children with their eye-sockets matted with insects. There are people starving to death, falling and being unable to arise. There are men driving themselves at labor in small fetid shops. There was never whip-slavery so harsh. There are men and women working in atmospheres so foul that they turn them purple in a few moments, and they

come out spouting blood-and go back in to the labor before they have rested. There are human people eating the filth in the gutters, and drinking the gutter runs. They are like this in their millions. I saw a large building fall down. There are women offering children for sale. There are old-clothes men who strip the corpses and leave them naked in the streets. Is there no compassion in the civilized sections of Astrobe? Can they do nothing to alleviate the misery here?"

"But, Thomas, everybody in Cathead and the Barrio is here by choice.

They left civilized Astrobe of their free will to set up these giant shambles.

They can return to civilized Astrobe today, within the hour, and be cared for and endowed with property, arid settled in ease. And they would be free of the mechanical murderers also."

"God over my head! Why don't they do it, then?"

"Somebody go with him!" Paul shouted, for the demented goat-man had started out into the roadway once more just when a din of killers had risen.

Several of the weary men had risen to it, and then fallen back.

Too late.

He had gone out in his distraction, and his small goats had followed him out. Perhaps he was more addled than usual. Perhaps he was not used to such concentrations of killers as were smelling around the presence of Thomas. The whipped crazy man knew how to dodge through one or two killers, scooting like a low whippet. There were too many to dodge.

The striding killers struck him down dead just outside the door.

Passersby withdrew to their own safety, and the little goats bleated in lonesomeness. Then, as the killers clashed along looking for new entrance, quick hungry people caught the little animals, fought over them, tore them apart, and began to eat hunks of them raw and bleeding.

"Enough," Thomas moaned. "I was never an advocate of wealth and fineness. I believe fully in holy poverty. But I say that poverty is like drink: a little of it is stimulating and creative; too much of it is depraved and horrifying. I must be about my work on this world, and I must get to the center of things before I can solve the mystery of degradation here. How can I get in touch with the men who sent for me? I have seen enough of the underside of this world for this day."

"A communication center is approaching, on two feet or on four," Paul said. "He can put anybody into contact with anybody."

"Aye, I feel him. He's talked to me, and I had but a short: glimpse of him at our ambushing. It is Rimrock, the oceanic man. He at least will talk sense."

And Rimrock, the oceanic man, came in; on no legs at all, then on four legs, then on two. And he shook hands with Thomas with great friendship.

An ansel is in appearance a little like a seal of old earth. It can slither with great speed along the land, just as though it were swimming in water.

It can walk passably, as a man or as an animal. And it has curious mental powers.

"My friend from the green ocean," Thomas boomed. "You of the rubbery black hide and the tufted earsl You bound or you walk, and you tally inside men's minds and make appearances. Read me the meaning of this damnable world, Rimrock."

"They sent for you and you come. I and others thought you should see a little of the sanity of Cathead and the Barrio before you are plunged into the madness of civilized Astrobe. But the great men are waiting for you impatiently, a day and a night and half a day now. They are frenzied that someone has stolen their prize and may somehow turn it against them. And I had to settle with another false ansel who spoke in the Paul's mind and tried to lure you to your death. It's fresh blood on me. I hope you don't mind."

Rimrock the ansel was much larger than any earth seal, and the slicing mouth on him was a meter long.

"It comes down on this placel" all the weary men with the red-rimmed eyes shouted, and they stormed up from. their sitting on the floor. "We go!

We go." They all rushed: off, some to the interior rooms of the building, some as a battling wedge with flailing staves and pokers through the killers in the roadway.

"What ails the fellows?" Thomas demanded. "What comes down on this place?"

"The bleak blackness," Rimrock said. "We have a visitation. He is curious about your being here. I know you have met him before in bits and snatches on your own world. I am sure that you encountered fragments of him in the passage here. Now it is himself."

The girl-woman Evita came in. She was like a wraith, of a sudden beauty and mystery, and a depth of depravity that took the breath away.

The short glimpse of her set Thomas to shaking. She was something not completely of nature.

"I wanted to see him and talk to him," the Evita said. "But the old monster comes instead. I will talk to the Thomas in another place and hour."

She vanished out again. Paul and Thomas and Rimrock the ansel were left alone. Then the monster Ouden came and sat in the middle of them and encircled them.

The short account that follows is necessarily mystic. We cannot be sure that Paul and Thomas held the same congress with Ouden. We cannot hear at all the exchange between Ouden and Rimrock, but we can sense it.

We cannot be sure whether it was Paul or Thomas forming the words in the man-Ouden conversation. It was a confrontation and a presence.

But the Paul-Thomas host knew who Ouden was. They shriveled together in his presence, and their bones grew hollow.

"You are like ghosts," said the Paul-Thomas. "Are you here only because we see you here? Which was first, you, or the belief in you?"

"I was always, and the belief in me comes and goes," Ouden said. "Ask the ansel: was I not of the Ocean from the beginning?"

"What have you done to Rimrock?" the Paul-Thomas asked. "He diminishes."

"Yes, he turns back into an animal in my presence," said Ouden. "So will you, and all your kind. You will turn further back, and further. I will annihilate you."

"I deny you completely," said the Paul-Thomas. "You are nothing at all."

"Yes, I am that. But all who encounter me make the mistake of misunderstanding my nothingness. It is a vortex. There is no quiet or static aspect to it. Consider me topologically. Do I not envelop all the universes?

Consider them as turned inside out. Now everything is on the inside of my nothingness. Many consider the Nothing a mere negative, and they consider it so to their death and obliteration."

"We laugh you off the scene," said Paul-Thomas. "You lose."

"No. I am winning easily on Astrobe," Ouden said. "I have my own creatures going for me. Your own mind and its imagery weakens; it is myself putting out the flame. Every dull thing you do, every cliche you utter, you come closer to me. Every lie you tell, I win. But it is in the tired lies you tell that I win most toweringly."

"Old nothingness who sucks out the flames, I have known flames to be lighted again," said the Paul-Thomas.

"It will not kindle," said the Ouden. "I eat yore up. I devour your substance. There was only one kindling. I was overwhelmed only once. But I gain on

it. I have put it out almost everywhere. It will be put out forever here."

"I piloted once to a world of deformed little animals of a certain stench,"

said the Paul-Thomas. "They ran in and out of old buildings that had been built by a cogent race. The experts to whom I brought some of the deformed little animals said that they were the fallen remnant of that cogent race. They were abominable little creatures whose only interest was to defile, and the experts said that they had fallen from something very like man."

"I know the folk you mean," said the Ouden. "They are a particular triumph of mine."

"Leave me nowl" the Paul-Thomas ordered sharply. "You are a nothingness, a ghost. One may order a ghost to leave."

"Never will I leave. Not ever in your life will you sit down that I do not sit down with you. And finally it will happen that only one of us is left to get up, and that will be myself. I suck you dry."

"I have one juice left that you do not know," said the Paul-Thomas.

"You have it less than you believe."

The Ouden monster had disappeared from them. Paul and Thomas More and Rimrock the ansel dozed. It had been a mere passage dream, one that was somehow left over.

"Look at them sleepl" giant Battersea cried in derision. "On your feet, the three of you. We mount battle array to convoy you back, and Rimrock must gather his wits to set up the communication."

"Whether your work on Astrobe be good or bad, you have to get on with it," said Shanty. "One doesn't save a world by napping away the noontime.

Come, we'll take you through the killers, and to the Important Men who wait for you. Then let you shrivel! Let you turn into things like them!"

It was really a battle array that Battersea and Shanty and Copperhead and others led. There was weaponry and vehicles, and the killers backed away from them frustrated. Paul and Thomas and the ansel rode out of vile Cathead and the Barrio, away from the Naked Sailor and ten thousand places like it, skirted giant Wu Town, and came into colossal Cosmopolis the Capital of Astrobe.

Misery forgot, here was opulence and ease, beauty and dignity of building and persons, the real golden world, the ideal achievement. It was the most beautiful and most highly civilized world ever built, the most peaceful, the most free from any sort of want. It dazzled.

And in the heart of Cosmopolis the three big men, along with the fourth member of the big three, all now in communication with the ansel and knowing of their coming, awaited their prize from the past that had escaped them for the two days since the landing.

4. ON HAPPY ASTROBE

THE FATHOMS of civilized Astrobe were almost beyond comprehending.

Thomas had a quick eye and a rapid mind, but he was dazzled by the wonders he rode through. Here were the homes and buildings of many millions of people, grand city after grand city, all in luxury and beauty and ease. Nor was it only the buildings and the perfected land and parks. It was the people. They were elegant and large and incredibly urbane, full of tolerant amusement for the rolling spectacle, of a superior mien, of a shattering superiority. They were the true Kings of Astrobe. Every man was a king, every woman was at least queenly.

"It is Rome arisen again a hundred times over," Thomas said. "It is the power and the majesty. For good or bad, this is what all folks have wanted from the beginning. Here are all dreams come true; here is the treasure at the end of Iris, the Pearl of Great Price, here is the fat land and the mighty City; it's the Land beyond the Hills of the Irish pipers, the Great Brasil, the Hesperides."

"Easy, good Thomas. It is a whited sepulcher. But do they not keep it neat and shined?" Evita mocked. Who was the Evita, and what did she here? Thomas asked as much.

"A blinking brat with a charisma on you!" Thomas exclaimed. "Who are you, girl, and what are you doing in my party? How are you a known person to all on this world, and you only a grubby child?"

But Evita did not answer. Thomas would never know for sure who she was, nor would others.

"Where do we go?" Thomas asked. "This is my dance and I should be calling the tunes. I will not be led by the hand like a boy. I will make my own arrangements."

"You have been doing so," said Walter Copperhead the necromancer.

"We do but proclaim it for you. We carry out every detail that you have ordered."

"But I have ordered nothing," Thomas said. "It runs too fast for me."

"In your own mind you order it," said Rimrock the ansel. "You vision it in a Roman or English context, and we transfer it to an Astrobian. It is a Triumph you require for yourself; not for pride or vanity, but for the solid establishment of a burgeoning regime. I have been transmitting your orders to the Anxious Powers, to the Great Men of Astrobe, and the Copperhead has been transmitting also. We call them and they are amazed. We order them to assemble. They will not, they say, and they do. They are startled, they are full of wonder even before they see you."

"Rimrock, Rimrock, you'd grow rich as a fawney man at a county fair in old England. No Gypsy ever set a spell so fine. But where do we go?"

"To the Convocation Hall, as you yourself have decided, good Thomas; to take it all swiftly while the tide is running for us. You will be the Sudden Apparition. You will accept the accolade and the mystic station of Past Master."

"I'm not even knowing what the Convocation Hall is," said Thomas as they rolled through the magnificent city of Cosmopolis in Battersea's armored wagon. "Who will be assembled there?"

"Those you have ordered to assemble will have assembled," said the oceanic Rimrock. "And the details work themselves out as we roll on, and always to our advantage. There's a small bloody battle going on now over the Exultation Trumpets, actually twelve small battles in the twelve steep towers around the Hall. The Trumpets haven't blown for twenty years, but you have decided wisely that they will blow for you. Happily your men win those small bloody battles now."

"I didn't know that I had any men," said Thomas.

The party rolled to the head of the Concourse. They stopped and dismounted. They walked the long Concourse between the rows of heavenly aspens. Then the whole sky broke open! The Exultation Trumpets blasted a deafening golden blare like twelve Gabriels announcing the second coming. The electrum doors of the Convocation Hall swung open to the soaring sound. This was a striking effect that had been devised two hundred years before. This was their moment, and the shabby incandescent party entered.

All the great ones of Astrobe sat in the high circle. They sat there in amazement, some willingly, some not. Many of them had been drawn there protesting that they would not go. The compulsion puzzled them, and they knew much about the management of minds.

And the Thomas More party stood in the Arena below them, but it was not at all as if the great ones were looking down on the party below.

Then all the great ones stood. And they hadn't intended to. The great ones of Astrobe stand only in the presence of a Superior. All were assembled, and all were on their feet now: Kingmaker, Proctor, Foreman, Pottscamp, Northprophet, Dobowski, Quickcrafter, Haddad, Chezem, Treva, Goldgopher, Chu, Sykes, Fabelo, Dulldoggle, Potter, Landmaster, Salver, Stoimenof, all the high dukes of Astrobe, half a dozen former world presidents, the tall scientists and mind-men, the world designers.

In the arena was Thomas More, dirty and in disarray, with a shattered jaw wired up by a Cathead knacker, a long-nosed, almost comical middle-aged man of short stature; the Paul Person who had lost his surname and his citizenship for irregular doings, and who now had bone splinters in his brain that affected his vision and his wits; Rimrock the oceanic man who communicated by means unknown and who was in appearance a grotesque rubber-nosed animal; Evita the legend girl-woman whose existence was doubted by all rationalists; Walter Copperhead the necromancer who was no better than an astrologer: all of them with the smell, and trappings of black Cathead still on them.

The vast sound of the Exultation Trumpets broke down in echoing fragments and left a vibrating silence.

And a Person had declared himself.

This was the Past Master, dead a thousand years, a dumpy little almost-old man, a pinkish little elf on a world of golden-bronzed giants. But on him in that moment was the magikos, a the charismatic grace, the transcendent magnetism, the presence, the messiahship, the draiocht. He had erupted in the middle of them with the dirt of the grave still on him, so it seemed. It was sheer ghostliness, the seeming of one who comes through closed doors and sealed tombs, one who is the master of time. It was transcendence touching them all.

Then came the Ovation like a pouring ocean. It broke in heavy crested waves, each one higher than the former. It lasted a great while. It lifted them up, all the golden cynics who had forgotten what it was to be exalted.

Some of them would speak of it later as their fools' carnival, yet it would always remain a stunning thing in their lives.

Thomas had them hooked without speaking a word. A presence had been created for him, and it had won. How that presence had been managed, and by whom, Thomas would try to sort out in his mind later.

Had it all been done by a quack man and a quack animal, and a brat child?

Who makes magic here? Clearly, several powers of a near-alien sort had been working for him there.

And that presence made itself known immediately, through all the Cities and through all that world, from one end to the other.

"It is the Past Master," the people everywhere said.

He had them, he had them. Then he spoke, loudly and clearly.

"I accept the great burden that has been given me to bear," Thomas announced in a silver voice that had a bit of the old grave-duct in its burr.

"Now we will set about the governing and righting of this world."

"He hasn't been offered the burden yet," Peter Proctor throat-growled to himself. But Peter was grinning a weird fox-like grin. Nobody appreciated a successful master-stroke so well as did Proctor.

And after minutes, or perhaps hours, the Convocation broke, and moved away in glittering fragments. The implementation of it would be done in smaller gatherings, in tight groups and committees. The particular details would evolve themselves out of shrewd staff work.

But nobody really doubted that they had their man.

"It was Rimrock, the rubber-nosed ocean-man thing," said Thomas when he had withdrawn with his party and was mingling with other functionaries.

"It was the Copperhead with his occult stuff. It was Paul with his broken crown, and the child-witch with the two opposite auras about her. They took all the grand ones like country ganglers with the magic show they did for me."

"Aye, and with trumpets!"

"I thought I was a master of contrived effects," Cosmos Kingmaker told Thomas, "but I never put together a show like yours. I have a personal

difficulty. My wife has been: regarded as the most beautiful woman on Astrobe, and she so regards herself. It is, indeed, a requisite of my position.

that I have the most beautiful woman on Astrobe. But the: legend-girl who is in your entourage has her startled, and the popular reports have torn her up. So long as the Evita was believed a legend it could be lived with. Now she has made another public appearance and everybody on the planet knows who she is."

"I have not seen the one, nor greatly noticed the other, except for certain queer qualities that cling to her, and they are not altogether of beauty. I have no idea at all how she happens to be in my entourage. She's a puzzler."

"So, you've been wandering like a loon these days and nights,"

Kingmaker accused, "and no telling into what hands you've fallen. It isn't a very responsible beginning. What hills and dales of Astrobe you've been wandering over h don't know."

"Through what swamps, rather. On Earth, at least, the loon is a bird of the swamps and meres. I've been in some brackish swamps."

"It's a bird, is it?" Kingmaker asked. "I thought it was. only an expression.

Well, whatever swamps you have been wading in, do not go to them again till you have been instructed. You will not know with what eyes to look at these things until we tell you."

"I had intended to use my own eyes."

"No, no, that won't do at all. We won't have you interfering with the things we have set up for you to do, or offering untutored programs on your own."

"You are saying that you won't have me interfering with the image that you intend to present me under?"

"That's it exactly, Thomas. The image has already gotten a little beyond what we intended. We were worried whether we could make it strong

enough. Now we are worried that perhaps it is a little too strong. I had expected you to be more amazed at the wonders of Astrobe, however."

"Kingmaker, man, I stand and stare boggle-eyed at them like a calf at the new barn door. Of course I'm impressed by the thousand years of technological advance since my time, half of it made since the first landing on Astrobe, much of it quite new to me. And in my day I had the name of being a forerunner in these things. I didn't know what questions to ask about the future when-well, when I talked to certain traveling men on this subject a long time ago, or at least a long time from here. I asked them questions of philosophy and theology and the political formation of commonwealths, and of the arts and tongues and of the mind understanding itself. It never struck me that the changes would be in material things. We had already made great advances in these, far beyond the Greeks and Romans, and I thought the cycle would swing back and the thousand years after myself would be devoted to advances in the intangibles. Aye, I'm impressed; the more I hear, the more I see, I'm impressed.

"The fact that there are no sick of body among you (except in the Barrio and Cathead) amazes me. The fact that there are no sick of mind among you would entice me also, had I not discovered for myself that so many of you are dead of mind. All your mechanical and mental things are new coinage to me. Your mind-probes and mind-crawls fascinate me, even when they are turned on myself. You have loosed them on me within the last several moments, have you not, Kingmaker? I can feel them crawling like moles through the tunnels of my head. Hah! I've got them calked now, though. I've but to think in Latin and they can't come into me. I always believed that it would be a mental image thing, not a verbal thing, when it came."

"We have both sorts, Thomas. The verbal is the simpler."

"So simple that you can hide it in the palm of your hand, Kingmaker, and you do."

"It's neater than eavesdropping," Kingmaker said, "and it does pick up the sub-vocals. You yourself use an ansel, but they haven't proved satisfactory. The ansel tends to forget that he is only a communication device. Sometimes he becomes the master. Most men think in words in their

unguarded moments, and particularly when they are voicing other words at the same time. Of course my own device here can be fitted with a Latin or any other attachment; it is just. that I had forgotten that Latin was still used in your day by the international scholar crowd. So I have missed a sequence out of your private thought, and just when it was getting pretty good. Would you repeat it for me?"

"No I won't, Kingmaker. It would burn the ears off you.. But of all the things I have seen on Astrobe to this minute, it. is your Programmed Persons who most enchant me: not the. Programmed Killers, who have given me some trouble, but the others. What a boys' dream come true! The old-time Greeks dreamed of this, you know, and the latter-time Jews. The mechanical man who works! What clockmaker's apprentice would not give half his soul for the secret? That we can make machines in our own image, and that they can outthink and outperform us! It's a marvel, Kingmaker. It hasn't grown to be a stale marvel with you, has it? And not only have men made them to perform better than men; but. now, so I'm told, the things make themselves better than men can make them."

"No, this marvel hasn't become stale to me, Thomas. I wasn't sure how you would take it, particularly since you. yourself have been attacked by the Programmed. The Killers themselves are a specialized minority, built to guard against any threat to the Astrobe Dream. But sometimes, it seems, they make mistakes. The Programmed themselves are the main thing, the men of the future, the successors to ourselves."

While Kingmaker talked, Thomas entertained in the cellar of his mind one of those passage dreams such as both he and Paul had experienced on the transit between Earth and Astrobe. Cosmos Kingmaker was a great golden spider, for all that he wore the head of a lion in the dream. Out of her webs she spun (for sex is often confused in these passage dreams) the whole great civilized world of Astrobe. The great buildings, the great societies, all were the fruit of these webs. The whole world of Astrobe was entirely of gossamer. But the rampant spider would defend her work in every flossy pinnacle of it. There would be no compromise here. The silky facade must be preserved. What matter that it had no substance?

Then a black wind arose, blowing out of Cathead. It began to rend the webs. "Here, here!" great Kingmaker shouted in the superb spidery voice.

"It is a false thing that blows. I am the true thing. I am the true cat-head, and not this other. I say to the winds `Be quiet! Do not rumble my webs, Oh do not rumble my webs!'"

"I will return to these wonders again and again, Kingmaker," Thomas said, talking on an entirely different level than that of his passage dream.

"And the most wonderful of all is your travel today. On my trip to Astrobe I traveled a hundred times farther in every second than I had gone in all my life before; and I am a traveled man, familiar in all the capitals of Christendom. Speed has become infinite."

"No, Thomas. Hopp-Equation travel is only the square of eight, or sixty-four times light speed. With that we can never hope to reach more than a narrow corner of the universe. Other number-base travel has been tried-the square of thirty-seven, for instance, or Horwitz-Equation travel. But no pilot has ever returned from that, or from any of the others. They may return a billion years in the future or in the past, or they may be lost. We aren't the lords of speed yet"

"Even so, you must have billions of worlds to colonize."

"No, not yet, not for many centuries. We have only six Proven Reserve Worlds after Astrobe. And the colonies on them are still sickly things. The elites do not go out to them as they went out from Earth to Astrobe. At the moment we are going nowhere except backwards."

"With every man-jack of you a thumping genius you should be going forward with a surge. Kingmaker, you figure to use me as a front; you have admitted as much. But a little study of recent Astrobe politics is not reassuring. I find that you have had for recent short-term world presidents a Mr. X, the Masked Marvel, the Asteroid Midas, and the Hawk-Man from Hellos. The latter must have looked rather like Foreman. They sound like the names of ancient Rome gladiators or, as one has suggested to me, of medieval American wrestlers. Now you take me for another costumed actor,

a contrived front-symbol for you to manipulate. You will bill me as the Past Master."

"Probably, since the name has taken the popular fancy. We haven't yet decided."

"Cosmos, I will be manipulated by no one! If elected president, I will preside!"

"That is what we both hope and fear, Thomas. No, your case is not like the others. We have run out of tricks, but the people haven't run out of expecting tricks. To be elected you must be presented as a contrived front-symbol. But to rescue Astrobe from its mortal difficulties you must supply us with a new element."

"I believe you're afraid of a new element, Kingmaker."

"Of course I am. But I will not have the fabric of our world rended."

"Do not rumble my webs, Oh do not rumble my webs."

"What, Thomas?"

"A fragment of a dream up from the cellar of my mind, no more. You will try anything, be it deepest change, to preserve the changelessness."

"I don't know what the necessary element will be, Thomas. Foreman believes that he knows. Thomas, you don't seem too curious about your own attempted assassinations."

"Oh, I've set up my own apparatus to go into that, Kingmaker. It reaches higher than the simple Programmed; it reaches to the complex Programmed and to the high-ranking human. There's a pretty strong party that wants me dead before I am ever, as it were, born on Astrobe."

"There's another thing we're afraid of, Thomas. We're afraid to show you, and afraid to hide you, and it's too late to make another choice. You have an impressive name to the initiates, you received a startling ovation which we do not understand-neither the thing itself nor our own part in it-and you

have an impressive contuming for the people. But you're not an impressive personality."

"You hear me now, Kingmaker! I do not strut sitting down, if that is what you mean. I do not play the great man privately. But I can be an excellent man when there is time for it, and you will not find a better. I was counted a master in my own time, and I be a master here. On the scene I can play the noblest rhetor of them all! There'll be nowt awkward or awry about my performance, Kingmaker. At this one thing for which Astrobe has a hunger now, high oratory, we were the professionals and you are the amateurs. I know that you have analyzed the thing and broken the personal aura down into its elements. It is like chopping up a bird, but can you make a bird?

Perhaps you can, since you made the Programmed Persons, but we recognize them as artificial. I know that you have built intricate eloquence machines, man, but they ring false. The laughter of the people at them like autumn leaves blowing is evidence of this. I've heard the eloquence machines, and I've heard the peoples' response. I've heard human and programmed orators who have studied under the eloquence machines; I've heard a lot of things in one week on Astrobe. People are hungry for the real thing, and I can give it to them. You try to analyze my ovation at my coming to Convocation Hall, and you fail. Part of it was the connivance of my friends and associates, and part of it was a congruity of circumstances. But the most of it, Kingmaker, was myself."

"We'll have to let you try it, Thomas. But don't ever try to set policy.

Politics on Astrobe has become an intricate science."

"Politics was intricate in my day," Thomas maintained.

But Kingmaker began to laugh at that. Thomas was not sure whether or not he had reason.

"We are lucky to be alive, Thomas," said Peter Proctor the lucky fox,

"and I do not mean it in any negative way, as though there were something threatening us. I mean that developments themselves are lucky, and on

Astrobe today things are the luckiest ever."

"Then why do so many choose to leave this life, Proctor?" Thomas asked.

"Leave it? You mean to join the Cathead thing? Or do you mean what was once vulgarly called the suicide rate? The first depresses me, the second delights me. Is it not lucky to be able to leave a life that cloys? Is it not lucky that there are such neat facilities for it? Should a man sit at table after he is sated? Why then should he live a moment longer than is required? Golden Astrobe is no prison; we do not build walls around it to keep men in. Life is not for everybody, and long life should be for none. A man may dispose of himself in a booth on any street corner. All apprehension and uneasiness has been removed. A man can leave with a clear conscience."

"Aye, do the dirty thing with a clear conscience. And you make it work."

"We live in a lucky world, Thomas. Now we rub our hands, and we will bring still more luck to it."

"I am the good-luck piece now, am I?" Thomas asked "And what thing are you, Peter? I have wondered. And so, I am told, have others."

"Me, Thomas? I'm the luckiest man in the world, any world. No need to look more deeply into me. I'm the second richest man on Astrobe, after Kingmaker. And all envy attaches to him, not to me. I am fortunate in wife, in offspring, in attainments, in residence-"

"I have heard the scree," Thomas said.

"And I am universally liked," Proctor finished with a look that was more than commonly fox-like.

It was another of those passage dreams up from the cellar of Thomas'

mind. Peter Proctor was a fox indeed, and he ran nimbly over a thin volcanic crust that had a very great depth below it. Thomas was in sudden terror of that emptiness below the crust, and the flickering flames that were only an aspect of that emptiness. Just how deep was the great space below

that thin crust? Thomas peered down. The space was forever. There was no bottom. Stars could be seen below, under their feet, but there was something the matter with these stars. They were crooked things, stars of the crooked light. But Peter the fox was in no way terrified with that great depth, not even when great clumps of the volcanic crust broke away before his feet and fell forever. "It is my home there," said the fox. "Let the crust sink down in it; let it fragment and break, and pitch all its fauna into the flames in the void. I welcome it, the fundamental void. I was born for it, and I will take all to it quickly, if only the meddlers who would prop up the crust will desist. The flames in the void are my home. Nothing can harm a fox with an asbestos tail." And then Thomas noticed that Peter the fox did indeed have an asbestos tail.

"But you were one of the three men who sent to bring me out of the past," Thomas said. "Why should you, if everything goes so well here?"

"Oh, I believed that you might do less harm than another, little Thomas.

You will be the newest novelty. We need such for the people in this temporality, this passing phase. The people must dine on novelties after they are cloyed of food."

"The constant search for novelty which is a form of despair."

"Who said that, little Thomas?"

"A Frenchman of some centuries after my time. I came on the phrase lately by accident."

"No, I believe that novelty is an aspect of ever-leafing hope in the great resolving, Thomas. Hope is a station that we pass on our way there. Hope is wonderful."

"Aye, Proctor. And luck is lucky. You don't seem quite real to me. I wonder if you cast a shadow."

"Not a black one, I hope, Thomas. You still wonder why I was a party to sending for you since things are going so well? I consider you an innocuous

man, an old-fashioned toy. Let the people have their toys."

"What will you do if I prove to be more than a toy?"

"It is lucky that I have so many sides to me. It is lucky that I can be very cruel without qualms. I can be very unpleasant when the situation calls for it.

Thomas, I will not allow you to become more than a toy. One wrong move, and you are a broken toy. Politics has become a science, and I am its only consummate scientist. Believe me, I am the only one who knows what is going on. I make it go. When Kingmaker washes his hands and absolves himself, I take over. If you prove to be more than a toy, I will take over."

"It is always darkest just before false dawn," said Fabian Foreman. "The foolish rooster has crowed (they had them yet in your day, did they not, Thomas, or have I my eras mixed?) and it is still night. Astrobe has been a false dawn, and now we believe that the dawn will never end."

"It seems rather bright to me here," said Thomas. "If this be night, what is the daylight like?"

"But we are wrong in believing that the darkness will continue forever,"

Foreman continued. "The true dawn must come, and quite soon or else nothing will come. The night will end, whether in daylight or in nothingness.

But I regret that the next grian-sun will come up behind a particularly dirty cloud. I simply do not see any other way to arrange it."

"Is it you personally who makes the sun to rise, Foreman?"

"Quite right, Thomas. It is I personally who will make this particular sun come up. Had you some idea that the sun came up by itself? Or that another than myself was calling the tune on it?"

"Proctor believes that he makes things go on Astrobe."

"But I make Proctor go, Thomas."

"He says that when Kingmaker absolves himself and washes his hands, he Proctor takes over."

"Of course he does. Kingmaker is the action. Proctor is the reaction or the nullification. How grandly Kingmaker acts! Oh how beautifully and automatically Proctor will react! Oh how cleverly I will abet them both in it!

And I be the only one who understands the results."

Out of the mind's cellar again a broached cobweb-covered bottle of the sparkly stuff! Ninety seconds of poignant drama that goes on while the rest of the world goes on, and exposes the roots of that world.

Foreman, his hawk-face set in a gash of torture, sat at a rougher table than one should find on Astrobe. He had thirty cockle shells on the table before him and he shuffled and counted them. He wept, but as a hawk would, awkwardly and in ungainly fashion, with a hideous cawing and coughing. "It has to be," he cawed. "There is no other way to bring it about"

But one of the cockle shells was actually a cockerel shell, and the Foreman-hawk noticed it with a start. Then a thunder came and sat down at the table with him. "It is Mother Carey's own chicken you destroy there,"

the thunder said. "There is not woe in all the worlds like your woe."

"I know how a cat watches a bird," the Thomas said to Foreman (and the passage bird had flown), "and I know how well the bird can serve the cat in his business. You'll nowt take me in one mouthful, though. I'm a boney bird, I assure you. And now I see that you are hawk and no cat, but still you pounce on me."

"What do you mean, little Thomas?"

"Proctor called me that too, and he also purred when he said it. I get you animals mixed; you are not the same types as on Earth. Foreman, I have the

feeling that you'll push me into a corner that I'm too stubborn to come out of."

"I must push everyone into corners that they're unable to come out of. I feel lonesome in that I am the only one who sees things so clearly and so far in advance. The first time it happened, did somebody push you into a corner that you were too stubborn to come out of? Do you know who did it to you, Thomas? Do you want me to tell you?"

"I don't want to know, because I suspect what man of good name it was who forced me to my murdering. But the first time hasn't happened to me yet. I was grabbed off by your pilot a few months before my Earth death that thousand years ago. I don't understand at all what happened that first time, since it hasn't yet."

"But I know, Thomas. Yes, a man did push you into such a corner before, and I will push you into such a corner this time. You couldn't expect a different ending, could you? It worked to a limited effect the first time. It half-saved a hopeless situation. It will work to a greater effect this time. I won't absolve myself or wash my hands, but I'll miss you."

"Foreman, in the whole Astrobe situation everyone is hiding something from me. Everything is wonderful on Astrobe, they tell me, and so it does appear to me, except for comparatively slight area of blight which has appeared will soon disappear. But it grows larger.

"The sickness of Astrobe can't be merely that a group has reverted, uneconomically, to a backward form of economy, to an obsolete form of life.

It is not that they have returned to the hard life of poverty, by free choice, and with no apparent compensation. There have been such cults before. If the sickness had been no more than this, you wouldn't have called me up to doctor it, or to serve as a front for those doctoring it. Well, something is very sick here; there's a beautiful golden 'ever that kills. I don't understand even the symptoms. And a hard man in Cathead told me that I would mistake the sickness for the cure."

"The hard man was half right, Thomas. The Cathead thing is madness to most, a turning to poverty and abject misery from free choice, and that choice made by millions of people, more than a tenth of those on Astrobe so far. You say you have seen the misery there. You could not have, not in two days and a night. It is the years and years of that bone-rotting misery that sickens the imagination. But the Cathead partisans say that their experiment is a Returning to Life. This I cannot explain to you, no more can they; you have to live your way into it and your own time is too short that.

Perhaps you'll see it in your last moment."

"Perhaps I'd see it now if somebody would talk sense."

"Oh, the two things are eating each other up, and who is to say which of them is the rightful body and which is the cancer? The Cathead affair is neither the sickness nor the cure. It is a symptomatic irruption, a surface effect of the sickness. We are sicker than Cathead. We are sicker than the Barrio. Oh, we'll die for it!

"I myself have made some plans for a resurrection or a rebirth; or for the coming of another thing that may have resemblance to present substance, but resemblance only. Now we prepare in small things, while the world ends. We'll make you serve the preparation, as we've made worse men serve lesser things. And you'll serve better after you're dead."

"Damn it, I am dead, from your viewpoint."

"Yes, that's the way I regard you. But your death here and now on Astrobe is what's required. The shape of things to come is very intricate, but it may work out for the best after we are past this tricky situation."

"For whose best, Foreman? I've the feeling that I'm being measured and dealt for."

"You are. Take the cheerful view, Thomas. You've been dead a thousand years. How will it matter what happens to you here?"

"Foreman, I'm quite interested in what happens to me after I'm really dead. I'm not dead now, whatever the seeming. They keep a different sort of time on the other side. I don't understand you, Foreman. Are you for me or against me?"

"I'm for you, Thomas, absolutely. I'm working for the very highest goal by the lowest of means. So I'm for you all the way, to the death and beyond-yours, not mine. And with those cheerful words you leave me."

"If these three are the inner group of the Circle of Masters, it is no wonder that Astrobe is sick," Thomas said to himself.

Thomas talked to Pottscamp, who has been called the fourth member of the big three. Thomas enjoyed talking to Pottscamp, one of the most interesting individuals he had ever met. Never was there a more pleasant or surprising person; and Pottscamp had a mind that was like quicksilver.

Sometimes Thomas was sure that there was nothing in that mind; and again there was very much in it. It was as though Pottscamp went to a source and dipped deep whenever he had the need to replenish himself.

Pottscamp had large innocent blue eyes and the look of perpetual youth.

And yet he had been active in Astrobe affairs for very many years and was certainly older than Thomas' normal age. But he was a boy, a precocious boy, a startling boy who might torture cats or commit abominations, but who would always do so with an air of total innocence.

"So that you will know who really runs things on Astrobe, Thomas-"

"I know, Pottscamp, I know."

Another capsule dream like a passage dream. There was a boy who built a toy. It was a clever boy, and a clever toy that he built. Which one was Pottscamp, Thomas could not say, for they both looked like him. "Go steal apples," the boy told the toy, and the toy did so. He brought back an armload in no time at all. "Go out to my best friend in the road there and knock him down," the boy-child said, and the toy did so. He knocked down

the best friend and in return he got himself bloodied up and battered. The child was de- lighted with what had happened to his best friend and to his toy. "Work out my language assignments for tomorrow," the child said, and the toy worked out all the constructions and translations of the Camiroi and Puca and Neo-Spanish assignments. "Drink," the child said, and the toy went and drank from the brook that ran beside the home-house. "Eat," the child said, and the toy ate the child up, every limb and light and bone and morsel of him. Was that Pottscamp? Was he a toy who would eat you up, or was he the guileless one who would be devoured?

"I know, Pottscamp, I know who runs things on Astrobe," Thomas said.

"Kingmaker runs everything by himself. So does Proctor. So does Foreman; he even makes the sun to rise. And so do you run it all, you will say."

But Pottscamp shook his head. "Our talk will be at another time, Thomas.

Our small conversation today was but to proclaim myself to you. You are a person; I am a person; the others are not, not really. If you were not of a certain consequence, or likely to become of consequence, I would not trouble to inform you and deal with you.

"A little later, Thomas, and in another place, we will talk at our leisure.

And with me there will be eight other entities that you will find very interesting. What you will meet on that evening in the near future is the real Circle of Masters, though several of us belong to both circles.

"We will instruct you on what is indeed taking place. We will show you the back of the tapestry. What you see now is not the true face of Astrobe, not all of it. The other side of the tapestry is shaggier, but it is a real picture also, and a much more meaningful one than the world you look at now.

Take out your eyeballs and polish them up, Thomas. Sweep out your ears and garnish them with acanthia. You will need all your sensing organs at their clearest to comprehend what we will reveal to you. Have you never had the feeling, Thomas, that you were looking at everything from the wrong side? You have been."

5. THE SHAPE OF THINGS TO COME

THOMAS WAS playing a precis machine which he had set to give him all general information about Astrobe. It was a good machine that would answer questions, and depart from its formulae to give personal opinions when asked to do so.

"Golden Astrobe is an urban world, a world of cities," the precis machine played. "If a man is important, then a city is more important, and a very large city is still more important. When we have all become one perfect city in our totality, then our evolving will be completed. The individual must pass and be absorbed. The city is all that matters. A city is more than the totality of the people in it, just as a living body is more than the heaped-up quantity of the total cells in it. When the cells consider themselves as individuals, that is cancer in the body. When men look upon themselves as individuals, that is cancer in the body politic.

"The great cities of Astrobe, in our present evolving phase towards the One Great City, are Cosmopolis the capital, Potter, Ruckle, Ciudad Fabela, Sykestown, Chezem City, Wendopolis, Metropol, Fittstown, Doggle, Culpepper, Big Gobey, Griggs, and Wu Town. Of these, Cosmopolis the capital is the most perfected, and Wu Town is the least. Yet there is hope even for Wu Town. All things achieve salvation in the great synthesis.

"All these cities are quite large, it having been found several centuries ago that a city of less than twenty-five million persons is not economical.

But beyond these there is no point in multiplying cities or people. The small annual increase that is allowed for Astrobe is balanced by emigration to colony worlds. We do not believe in heaping up people."

"What about Cathead?" Thomas asked the precis machine. "Cathead is the cancer that is being excised from this world. It is the cancer because the inhabitants of Cathead regard themselves as individuals and believe in the importance of themselves. Yes, Cathead is quite large, the largest of the cities, larger even than Cosmopolis the capital. We will leave Cathead out of account here since it is not typical of Astrobe.

"There is no poverty on Astrobe since all persons have access to all things. There is no superstition, nor belief in anything beyond, since there can be nothing beyond. Any beyond will ultimately be evolved from the here. While Astrobe is the highest thing there can be nothing higher. This is the essence of the Astrobe dream. There is no sickness on Astrobe, either bodily or mental. There is no nervousness, apprehension, or fear. All arts and all sciences are open to every person. Travel about the world is by instantaneous conveyance. The weather and the oceans have been controlled. There is no feeling of guilt, since freedom from every repression has been achieved. There is no cruelty or hate. There is no possibility of sin, since there is nothing to sin against. There is every luxury and every interest available to everyone. There is almost perfect justice. The few remaining courts are to provide redress to inequities brought about by misunderstandings; and these become fewer and fewer."

"It has its points, it has its points," said Thomas, and rubbed his hands.

"And yet it seems as though someone has recounted all this long ago."

"New dimensions of pleasure are achieved daily and almost hourly," the precis machine played. "All live in constant ecstasy. We are all one, all one being, the whole world of us, and we reach the heights of intense intercommunion. We come to have a single mind and a single spirit. We are everything. We are the living cosmos. The people of Astrobe do not dream at night, for a dream is a maladjustment. We do not have an unconscious, as the ancient people had, for an unconscious is the dark side, and we are all light. For us there is no future. The future is now. There is no Heaven as the ancients believed; for many years we have been in the only after-life there is. Death is unimportant. By it we simply become more closely integrated into the City. We leave off being individual. In us there is neither human nor programmed, but we are all one. We verge to our apex which is the total realization of the world-folk. We become a single organism, ever more intense and more intricate, the City itself."

"I remember now who it was who limned this all out before," said Thomas. "It was myself. What other man makes a joke about a tree, and the tree bears fruit? But I like it more now than when first I mocked it. It sounds

better when it comes tumbling from another mouth, even a tin mouth. What, shall I be enchanted by my own spell?"

"We all say the same things, we all think the same thoughts, we all have the same feelings and pleasures," the precis machine played. "Both love and hate disappear, for they were two aspects of the same thing-a mantle that was worn by our species in its childhood. We stand unencumbered before the Brian-sun. We are the sun. We are everything. We merge. We loose both being and non-being, for both are particulars. We become the extensible and many-dimensioned sphere that has neither beginning nor end, nor being. We enter the calm intensity where peace and strife cancel each other out, where consciousness follows unconsciousness into oblivion.

We are devoured by Holy Nothingness, the Big O, the Ultimate Point for all us ultimates."

"Shove it, my little mechanical mentor, shove it," Thomas More said. "I made it up, I invented it. It was a joke, I tell you, a bitter joke. It was how riot to build a world."

"But I am not finished," the precis machine played. "The vision still ascends. Well, no, it doesn't exactly ascend beyond a certain point, since it has reached a sphere where there is neither up nor down. But it becomes intensity still more intense, and-"

"Shove it, little tin horn, shove it," Thomas laughed.

"You are not impressed by the golden Astrobe Dream that is becoming reality?" the precis machine asked with apprehension, or with what would have been apprehension if that still obtained on Astrobe.

"Not very much," Thomas said. "I invented it all for a sour joke. I mustn't let the sour joke be on me."

And yet Thomas was impressed by the Astrobe achievement, if not by the Astrobe dream. There was a terrible clarity running through everything, a simplicity containing. all the complexity. In matter and mind Astrobe was

neat, and the rains fell always at their scheduled hour. That something: there was order.

Astrobe was an urban world. All its great cities were really one, in a single close cluster. The countryside was little used. There were the automated production strips, and there were the feral or wild strips to keep the balance. Few people lived in either. It was the cities that were the heart of Astrobe, and the people of the cities were born knowing everything.

There were no individuals with sharp edges, there were. no dissenting or pernicious elements, there was the high flat plane of excellence in all things.

What can you say against a world that has gained every goal ever set? And there was... pleasant termination available as soon as a touch of weariness set in.

"It sets in with me already," Thomas said. "I have to hold onto myself with both hands every time I pass a termination booth."

But one thing seemed to be lacking on Astrobe, and it puzzled Thomas.

"Where do the people attend mass?" he asked as he stood in the middle of golden Cosmopolis.

"They don't, Thomas; they haven't for centuries," Paul told him. "Oh, there are a very few who do sometimes. I do myself on occasion, but I am a freak and usually classed as a criminal. And in Cathead there has been a new appearance of the thing, along with other oddities. But not one person in ten thousand on Astrobe has ever attended."

"Are there no churches at all, then?"

"In Cathead and the Barrio and the feral strips there are a very few that might still be called by the name. Such buildings as remain in Cosmopolis and the other Cities are under the department of antiquities. Some of them have period statuary that is of interest to the specialist. While mass itself cannot be found in any of them here, the replica can be played on demand."

"Let us go to one of them."

After groping about in some rather obscure streets that Paul knew imperfectly, they found one. It was quite small and tucked away in a corner.

They entered. There was the sense of total emptiness. There was no Presence.

"I wonder what time is the next mass." Thomas said. "Or the mass that is not quite a mass. I'm not sure that I understand you on it."

"Oh, put in a stoimen of d'or in the slot, and push the button. Then the mass will begin."

Thomas did. And it did.

The priest came up out of the floor. He was not human, unless he was zombie human. He was probably not even a programmed person. He may have been a mechanical device. He wore a pearl-gray derby hat, swish-boy sideburns, and common green shorts or breechcloth. His depilated torso was hermaphroditic. He or it smoked a long weedy-weed cigarette in a period holder. He began to jerk and to intone with dreadful dissonance.

Then a number of other contrivances arrived from somewhere, intoning in mock chorus to the priest, and twanging instruments.

"For the love of Saint Jack, what are those, Paul?" Thomas asked in bewilderment. "Are those not the instruments described by Dante as played in lowest Hell? Why the whole thing has turned into a dirty burlesque, Paul, played out with unclean puppets. Why, Paul why?"

"Oh, it had really turned into such a thing before it died, Thomas. This is what the Church and the Mass had become when it was taken over by the government as a curiosity and an antique."

Well, the replica mass ran its short course to the jerking and bawling of the ancient ritual guitar. At sermon time was given a straight news-broadcast, so

that one should not be out of contact with the world for the entire fifteen minutes.

At the Consecration, a sign lit up:

"Brought to you Courtesy of Grailo Grape-Ape, the Finest of the Bogus Wines."

The bread was ancient-style hot-dog rolls. The puppets or mechanisms danced up orgasmically and used the old vein needle before taking the rolls.

"How do you stop the dirty little thing?" Thomas asked.

"Push the Stop button," Paul said. "Here, I'll do it." he stopped it.

"Why, I wonder how it all came about," Thomas

"That snake on a stick, is it meant to be the Christ? Is that leering whore holding the deformed monkey meant to be the Virgin? A dirty little burlesque, a dreary bit of devil worship. But even dirty burlesques are not made out nothing. Had the mass really fallen so low?"

"So I have read, Thomas. It fell to just this low estate before it became ritually frozen."

"Then the Church was only a thing like other things, Paul? And it died as other things do?"

"So most say. The Metropolitan of Astrobe still lives, but he is a very old man; and the office will probably not be continued beyond his lifetime.

There is a slight revival of the Church in Cathead, as I mentioned."

"Acceptance in Cathead is enough to damn a thing in any clean region.

Cathead, that cancer growing on the fair planet!"

"And in the feral strips there are small groups who keep a rite that is not a burlesque."

"Well, I never had too much faith, Paul. I believe for a while in the mornings if I wake feeling well. But my belief is almost always gone by noon. Somehow I thought that the Church would continue, but I don't know why I thought so. It would, after all, be an anomaly on rational Astrobe. Aye, I'm glad to see the old thing gone."

"I'm not," Paul said bitterly. "I came to it when it was a black remnant in my darkest days in Cathead, but it's more than all the other things. Yes, I'm crazy, Thomas; I have bone splinters in my brain. But it's curious that you are a saint in the Church in which you don't believe, which you are glad to see gone."

Thomas laughed loudly and clearly, a really cheerful thing, high and fluted. He and Paul went out into the sudden golden daylight.

"Aye, they were right to push the old fraud into a corner and turn her into a dirty burlesque," Thomas said. "If the tree does not bear fruit, cut it down."

Thomas spent entire days marveling at the wonderful ways of Astrobe.

He had been something of a skeptic at first. Now he had swallowed bait hook, line, rod, and fisherman's arm. He had become a sudden strong advocate of the Astrobe dream. And yet he wanted to look more deeply into the workings of the thing, to examine its more distant roots and sources.

"It is hardly to be believed," he said one day when he had his retinue with him. "Come, people, we will see more of this. We travel again."

Against the advice of his mentors, Thomas had decided to take some time to examine Astrobe.

"There is no point in travel, Thomas," Kingmaker had told him. "It is all the same everywhere. That is the beauty of Astrobe: it is the same everywhere."

"Go where you will and see what you see," Proctor told bim, "but do not believe everything that you think you have seen. When you get back, I will tell you what you have seen. There have been sad cases of men who say

things falsely, and I had to take a hand.- I do not want to do that. Luck be on thy head good Thomas."

"You will not know how to see, Thomas, you will not know how at all,"

Fabian Foreman told him. "You haven't the eyes for it. You will see it all from the wrong side. You are an awkward man, Thomas."

"In that hour it will be given you what you will see," Pottscamp told him.

"And a little later, in a secret place and out of context, you will sit down with nine entities (one of them myself) and you will be told what these things have been. You see now toy things with toy eyes, but in that time you will be given seeing."

Thomas had a loose retinue. He had chosen some of the members. And some of them had chosen him. It wasn't the group that the big men would have picked for him, though there was one spy for the big men in the group.

There was his old Earth-to-Astrobe pilot Paul; there was Scrivener and Slider; there was Maxwell and Walter Copperhead; there was Evita the girl-woman from the Barrio who was sister to the boy Adam; there was Rimrock the ansel whom Thomas called the Oceanic Man.

But first, just what is an ansel anyhow? And what was Rimrock, who was a most exceptional ansel? Ansels weren't understood at all on Astrobe, and that was their only home.

"Would you tell me of your origin, Rimrock?" Thomas asked him, "of yourself personally, and of your species?"

"I would, but I'm not sure I can," Rimrock said. "What: little we know of ourselves we have learned from regular people, or have guessed. When we passed through the strangeness and changed our cast this entailed forgetting much of our beginnings. It is a childhood now shut off from us.

You see, there were no ansels to be found on Astrobe, when Earthmen first came here.

"It wasn't until the second generation of men on Astrobe that any of us were discovered and we were quite backward. We do not generate rapidly; but none of us die in.our present memory, so we do increase in numbers.

We have developed from contact with regular people, and we ourselves have more influence on people than they suspect. People children are forbidden to associate with us, but they dream about us, as do the adults. It is nonsense that the happy people of Astrobe do not have night dreams. I have walked through many thousands of those dreams myself. I cannot see that we have any limit, Thomas, though I am not clear as to what our symbiotic relation with regular people should be."

"But you must know where you came from, Rimrock!"

"Well, we do know it, but we have garbled it in legend.: Our legend is that we are the people who climbed all the way to the sky, broke holes in it, and climbed out into a strange world that is above the sky. This world that you know, the noon-day world of Astrobe, is the world that is above the sky.

You do not feel it, but we do.

"We were deep ocean creatures, Thomas. I remember, like a thing before birth, the world of the depths; but we didn't consider it as the depths.

We loved to climb, to fly; our epics were all stories of such daring. We loved the pinnacled mountains. Our heros were those who climbed them the highest. We flew up and ever up, establishing settlements on higher and still higher mountain ledges. We came to the beginning of light, and then to the beginnings of vision. This was the first of the strange zone that we had to cross. When we came out of it on the higher side we would be different creatures with minds formed again.

"For there had come the exciting rumor that some of the great mountain spires might actually pierce the sky itself. We had, of course, long talked to fish creatures who claimed that they had been all the way to the sky; that they had, indeed, leapt through holes in the sky, and then fallen back. But who believes fish?"

"You did really talk with fish, Rimrock?"

"Why not, Thomas? We now talk with men, who are much more intricate creatures. But this fish story was true. I remember it all, as of something from another life, the epic thing we did. I was a member of the first party.

We flew and climbed higher and higher to truly dizzy heights. We went up the sheer cliffs of the edge-of-the-world mountain; all the strong stories were that this was the one that surely pierced the sky. We ascended more than ten kilometers, fearful always that we would not be able to live at that height.

"The sky, we had believed ever since we had received wisdom, was at an infinite distance from us and would always appear at the same distance no matter how high we climbed. We now discovered that this was not so.

We came closer to the sky and we were almost hysterical in our excitement.

We came all the way up to it and touched it with our members. We did not die, as we had feared. An epic hero had done this aeons before, but he had died from it. So it was no ordinary thing that we did."

Rimrock had at first been talking with free movement of his rubbery mouth. But for a while his mouth had not moved, and he was talking in Thomas' head. He could speak in either manner, and he did not always realize himself when he went from the one to the other.

"Then we burst through, splintering holes in the sky, and came out gasping into the world that is above the sky,"

Rimrock recounted. "To your viewpoint, we came up out of the ocean onto the land. But it is yourselves who do not appreciate the magnitude of it.

You did it so long ago that you have forgotten it, both in your minds and your underminds. But how can you forget that you live on the top of the sky?

How can you forget that every moment you walk you are walking on a precarious rug higher than a five thousand story high building? Do you know that the highest flying birds of the air cannot rise one tenth as high as we stand now?

"Thomas, I was one of the first ones who splintered the sky and came up on the sky-shore," Rimrock proclaimed. "I was one of the primordial heros. And we found that skyshore sprinkled with shells in the form of stars for signature of it. May the sense of wonder never leave me!"

"I begin to get the feel of you more and more," Thomas said, "not in words, but in old shapes."

"Regular people have sealed off the interior ocean that used to be in every man," Rimrock said. "They closed the ocean and ground up its monsters for fertilizer. That is why we so often enter into peoples' dreams.

We take the place of the monsters they have lost."

"What occupations do ansels follow?" Thomas asked him.

"Some are in communication, since each of us is a communications center. But most of us work as commercial divers, underwater welders, pier-builders, that sort of thing. Water is still our first element, but the waters around Cathead where I work have become so foul from the uncontrolled industries that they bother us. The poor lungers of Cathead cough up their lungs from the contaminated air. We suffer in our five bladders from the contaminated water. It is a rare treat for us to get away for a day or two in clean air or in clean ocean."

"Are you paid well for your underwater work, Rimrock?"

"No. A stoimenof d'or a week." The stoimenof d'or is a small gold coin.

"Why do you work for money at all? You don't wear clothes or live in houses or eat food that is sold for money. What do you do with your money?"

"Play fan-tan," said the ansel.

Well, what was Evita? We don't know, Thomas never knew, she was never sure herself. She was one of those who had chosen Thomas, not been chosen by him.

"All on Astrobe will think it strange if you do not travel with a mistress,"

she said. "Nobody has ever done that before. They will believe that you are not in accord with the Golden Dream of Astrobe. I know that you would not like to seem an awkward and impossible person, and I will not allow another woman to be with you."

"I am an awkward and impossible person, and it bothers me nowt at all,"

Thomas said. "Leave me, you scrawny young witch. I have seen sparrows, and they still fledglings, with more meat on them."

"You know that's not true. What kind of fat tubs did they like in your day?

I am quite well fleshed, and I've been called the most beautiful woman on Astrobe. You will also find me intelligent, and in this I'm exceptional.

Astrobe, though you may not have noticed it yet, has a high level of mediocrity only."

"You are misnamed, Evita; you travel falsely. You are no Eva, but the Lilith who was before her, the witch."

"I am both. Did you not know that they were one? And I have a personal reason. When I decided to go to Hell to prove a point, I set myself a goal: the seduction of a saint. But where else can I find one? They have not canonized one for hundreds of years. Big little Thomas, out of time and out of place, you are the only certified saint I'm ever likely to meet."

"We are neither of us any longer of the flesh in that way," Thomas said.

He said nayther where you would say neither, one of the oddities of speech that still clung to him; and there was a burr in his talk. "And you yourself

are now taken by a much deeper passion, Evita," he said, "and it precludes the other thing. Come along then, child-witch. If we ever run hungry on the heaths we'll have you spitted, and break you up haunch and chine, and eat you complete; and be hungry again within an hour."

He joked. She was of copious build, and she smiled down on him. The color of her hair? The color of her eyes? The incredible lines of her? No, no, they won't be given here.

You will not know them till the Last Day, and then only if you are one of the blessed.

Scrivener? Slider? Maxwell? Copperhead? Who were they? What was the mind and the man of each?

Hear Slider speak:

"Are we still dangling on the thread, or has the thread' been broken even before the official act (soon to be proposed) to break it? The Ancient Instruction was to go to I All Nations. But we .are not the Nations. We are something ' different. The Promise was that the Transcendent Thing would endure till the End of the World. But we are not the World. We are quite a different world, and no promise' was ever given to us. We cannot even assume that. we are, human; how deep does the Astrobe mutation really go? How, many of us are Programmed Persons? And how much of the"

programmed descent is in us who regard ourselves as oldline humans? We have changed in mind and body.

"The morality of Golden Astrobe is abysmal by any older:, comparison, but may we use an older comparison? On Olds Earth was once a thing named Slavery. We do not name it that here, but we have it. It is now the instinct for finding: one's place in the Golden Hive. Try to break out of it! Try to avail yourself of the total freedom! Meet the overriding regulations.

"What were once called the unnatural lusts may natural here; they are universal. It may be that we are not in, terrible shape at all. Thomas at first believed that we were, and now he believes we are in wonderful shape. He

is a wise man and he studies us; he wonders why we sent for him. But if we are in wonderful shape, is it still the shape of man? When it becomes impossible to distinguish certain artificial things from ourselves, then we must doubt that we are still people.

"When the killers pursue me, then I feel that I am coming, near some truth. But when they let me alone, I know that I. am dealing in trivialities.

"Walter Copperhead, who predicts futures, says that Scrivener and I will change persons and souls in our final day. I say that we will not. How could we trade souls? He has none."

Slider was a slight, pale, moody young man. He was very serious, and felt that everybody was laughing at him. Usually they were. Thomas was doing so silently as he heard this screed. He had known such young men before. Slider himself, knowing who Thomas was, expected something more of him. He was shocked by his lack of depth. Slider, out of his own deep insufficiency, intended to supply that lack.

Hear Scrivener speak:

"I would declare myself enthusiastically for all things of Astrobe, were enthusiasm an element of the true Astrobe character. It isn't, and it should not be. We are the first mature beings ever, and enthusiasm is no part of us.

In Astrobe we had built the perfect world. Perhaps it should have ended in its state of perfection, but it did not end. Instead, our world has become infected with a cancerous growth. `Cut it out,' we say, but for some reason we hesitate.

"Slider is part of that cancer. He has doubts, and doubt is the essence of this enemy. Of course we are not the nations or the world! We are beyond such. Of course no promise was ever given to usl We make the promise to ourselves; there is none above us to make it. How deep does the Astrobe mutation go? It goes from the bottom to the top, as it should. Of course we are no longer in the shape of men. Mankind was the awkward childhood of our species; we do well to forget it. We will excise our last flaw, and then we will achieve realization and annihilation.

"The killers do not trail me. Why should they? I am of their own species.

And Walter Copperhead reads this future wrong. Slider and myself can never change places. He has no place."

Scrivener was a bigger man than Slider, but was softer and fatter both in speech and person. He had had a programmed father and a human mother.

Though young, he did have a sort of Astrobian maturity. Slider and Scrivener thought of themselves as deep opposites, and yet Thomas and others tended to confuse them. They were so alike in their fuming differences)

Hear Maxwell speak:

"I take myself as an example that Astrobe is not perfect, even excepting the cancerous growth of Cathead and the Barrio. I am an aberration. A perfect world would be made up of perfectly integrated persons, and I am not one. There are no words for my particular wandering from the normal.

Only Copperhead knows me well enough to have any idea what they are. I will only say that I have a very loose attachment to my own body. I have not always been in the same form. I do not always recognize my previous forms. The great Astrobean Advance was bound to throw off such reactions as myself.

"And yet I am enthusiastically for Astrobe, in a way that Scrivener cannot be. Enthusiasm may not be a part of finest Astrobe, but it is a part of me. I likewise believe that we must kill the Cathead mutation, though it will be killing part of myself to do it. No mind; I have had parts of me killed before. I have had whole bodies killed. I am a spook, and Astrobe does not believe in such. But, for all that, I believe in her.

"I burn myself up for this thingl I mean it literally. I have burnt myself up and died several times, though I do not understand it. I will still be the burning brand for this thingl"

This Maxwell was a most curious-looking man, if he was a man. When he said that he had a very loose attachment to his own body, he apparently meant that he did not always inhabit his same body in the usual sense. But his appearance was that he had a very loose attachment to his own body in that his body was too big for him and fitted him loosely. There are animals who have this looseness in their hidesthe Earth tiger and the Astrobe lazarus lion-and in them it is a sign of strength and swiftness. In Maxwell it was a sign of weakness and slowness, almost of witlessness. It was a good-sized, swarthy, almost sinister body that he wore, and it was a sepulchral voice he spoke with. But one had the impression that he had to stand on tiptoes to see out of his own eyes; and that he was piping a small voice into the resounding thing as though it were an independent instrument.

He wasn't a particular ornament to the retinue, either personally or mentally. Yet he had a real seriousness that made that of Slider and Scrivener seem brittle.

Hear Copperhead speak:

Now a part of that speaking had been with certain rough men of Cathead. "Will he?" Battersea had asked Copperhead sharply. "He will,"

said Copperhead. "I don't see how," said George the syrian. "He doesn't look like much. I'll bet the forces of Astrobe will smash him like a rotten egg." "Oh, they'll smash him, all right," Copperhead explained. "The new man is a dead man; his time runs out almost before it begins. So, he's been dead before, it won't help him now. He will fumble it all, our new man; he'll do only one small thing right." "But you say he'll maintain his ways in this present," Shanty growled. "He will, and in the damnest left-handed way anybody ever saw," Copperhead maintained. "What instruments they do work withlwhoever they are. Men, this ferret-eyed stubby man from the doubtful past will save our worldl That is what matters. That he won't save himself doesn't matter to me, to none of us, I believe." "It will matter to me,"

Paul said. But the thing about this Copperhead was that he really could predict futures.

"I do have powers. I'm a new thing. Why should you suppose that a new thing would be one of the elite, an acceptable, a sensitive? No new thing has ever appeared as such. Always it comes tainted, with dirty hands. If a doctorate professor of the psychical should announce a new thing in a sensitive individual, one might be tempted to consider it. But to believe that it comes out of Cathead, in the form of a fortune-teller on fortune-tellers row, boggles the imagination and sets up shouts of disbelief. It's true, though. I may be the least sensitive man who ever lived. I'm crude. I live by fraud.

But I can see the future."

Copperhead had something goatish in his appearance. He was a good-humored satyr, and he was crude. Rimrock understood from the beginning, and Maxwell had learned accidentally, that Copperhead did have depths of sensitivity and intelligence and compassion; but he chose to hide these things.

People, they were a funny-looking party! Rimrock the ansel, tall Paul and stubby Thomas, Slider and Scrivener, Maxwell and Copperhead, and the bewildering Evita. Had she gray eyes or blue or green? Had she smoky-blonde, or golden, or dark hair? Was she slight or was she buxom?

The fact is that all saw her differently, and all heard her voice differently. It sounded now, but did it ring out or bubble up, or purr or croon, or lilt or laugh or intone; was it a flute or a trumpet or a nine-stringed lyra? Was it a silver cymbal or a bronze concentus?

"Be quiet, everyonel" Evita sounded (for words cannot give an idea of the harmonies in her). "Holy Thomas is hatching an idea! See him sparkle when a whim settles on him! He has sampled all the great things of Astrobe and has told himself how wonderful they are. Then why is he looking at the mountain?"

It was a sharp shock to all of them, the thing that had taken hold of Thomas now. That most practical of all men was in a trance. Rimrock remembered the great day when he himself had splintered holes in the sky and broken through. Maxwell recalled an ecstasy in an earlier body.

Copperhead relived the moment when the new power came to a man with dirty hands. Paul remembered what he had almost been, and Evita relived aspects of her own legend. Slider and Scrivener may not have been capable of such flights.

"Why do I look at the mountain?" Thomas asked as he came out of his daze. "An Astrobe psychologist has told me that only people crippled in their personalities will look at such things as mountains. He says that this was much more common in former centuries. Well, I have sampled Golden Astrobe and it is wonderful. But I am still hungry. What if we do go in that direction?"

"If we go in that direction, we walk," Scrivener said. "There are no transportation booths in the feral regions, only in the civilized. That region is all beyond the pale. It is for beasts, if they still live, but not for men. The mountains are retained; they are somehow a key to the weather control.

But they are no concern of rational people."

"I believe that we will walk for a day or two and see the mountain,"

Thomas said.

"The Programmed Killers aren't inhibited at all there," Maxwell told him.

"They will follow and kill us."

"They aren't invincible. Let's go to the mountain," Thomas repeated.

"What if we climb and cross the mountain at that saddle, and go thence?

And what if we follow around that circle thereby?" Thomas asked, pointing.

"Around that circuit of the feral country, a hard foot way, and in seven or nine days you will come to big Cathead from its back side," Copperhead said. "Some of us will die of it, but not all. There's an old proverb: Ì haven't lost anything on the mountain.' But I believe that I may .have, and I'd like to find it again. I'll go willingly with you."

"It's stark madness to go there," Scrivener insisted.

"Not at all," Thomas said. "A soft sort of madness it may be. We hadn't such mountains in England, and I saw them only at a distance in Spain and Savoy. In the stated problem of Astrobe everyone has been overlooking something. Were it not odd if the high mountains were the one thing that people could not see? Let the Programmed Killers trail usl I always liked either end of a hunt. Come along now. I'll not be done out of this."

6. STING IN THE TAIL

THERE WAS no close Earth equivalent to those Feral Lands of Astrobe, though certain Earth rain-forests had some of the characteristics. The difficulty for an Earthman, or for a man from Astrobe either since the civilized people of Astrobe were not acquainted with these regions, was in knowing just where the ground itself was. And in plain fact there was no ground itself, nothing that could be called the surface, the fundament. Were you now working through the surface of a rough meadow? Or were you working through the tops and middle heights of trees?

And another plain fact was that there were no trees themselves. One could not say that this was one tree and that one was another. They were not individuals; they were one creature. As well say that this is a grass, and that is a grass. They were entangled. In the thick going if you climbed down far enough into the sleek darkness you still would not find firm ground.

Water rather. And even in this fundamental bottom water it was possible to go down still more hundreds of feet through the growing plants and roots, never finding any bottom except a growth too dense to permit further descent.

And yet the party walked and scrambled and stumbled along pretty well, going up and down; now on a good matted surface, now along a sparse skeleton of green girders; sometimes skirting large aereal ponds that had been built by the kastroides. Some of these ponds were more than a hectare in area, quite deep, and of a lively surface both from creatures and from the effect of the swaying support.

"I will make my own way now," said Rimrock the ansel, "but I will see you again this night. And later I will see you on the mountain."

And the ansel disappeared as though into a deep well; and perhaps he traveled entirely under water through the deep roots of the complex.

Nobody doubted that he could make better time than could the party.

"And I will make my own way," said Walter Copperhead the necromancer. "I have certain riddles to ask the woods and the mountain, and they do not speak when others are present. And I also will see you several times before you stand up in the high lightning. When you have killed the Devil I will be there. I have laid out his entrails and examined them before, but I haven't unriddled all their riddles. I'll have another go at it."

Walter Copperhead left them with great leaps. He was a goat of the tree-tops.

"He is an odd one," Thomas said. "I'm not sure that a Christian man is permitted congress with such."

"I'm not sure that you still consider yourself a Christian man," Paul said.

"What are the hoppers?" Thomas cried, himself hopping away from Paul's question. He was asking about the leaping creatures that were now all about them. "They're from the size of a rat to the size of a sheep, but they all seem of one species."

"I don't know about things like that," Scrivener said.

"And I sure do not," said Slider. "The things in the feral regions are an obscenity to all civilized persons. We class them with excrement."

"There is no love of wild nature among the civilized people of Astrobe,"

Maxwell said. "These things are less real than creatures in dreams. I doubt if they have a name."

"They're good to eat," Evita said. "People still ate them when I was a kid, and I have eaten them quite recently."

"It's the jerusalem coney," Paul said.

"Thank you," Thomas acknowledged. "It's as refreshing as it is unexpected to get an answer to a question on Astrobe."

The coney was a curious hopping creature, most of them the size of big rabbits, some smaller, some very much larger. They went indiscriminately into the ponds and under the water, and up into the higher reaches of the trees with great accurate hops; and through brush so thick that it would seem a snake could not traverse there. They were quick, and neither Thomas nor Paul could catch one.

"Along with the dutch-fish and the rambler's-ox, the coney is the food basis of the feral lands," Paul said. "Everything lives on them, or on that which lives on them. The direwolves live on them, as does porches-panther, and the hydra. The birds live on them, and all the predators."

"The animals sound very like those of Earth," Thomas said.

"No, Thomas, only the names are like those of Earth," Paul said, almost in ,awe. "On Earth there are no animals at all like those around us. We are fools, you know, to be here. Scrivener and his like are correct. A rational man has no business here. I know a cliff not a half day from here where there are a thousand human skeletons hung up on thorn bushes. The rouks fly down and kill people for fun. They carry them up and hang them there for a warning. Most of those bones have old black meat still clinging to them. You told me that in your time on Earth men killed wolves and hung them on fence rails as warning to other wolves. This is the same. There is even the tale that the King Rouk pays a bounty to each rouk who so kills and hangs up a man."

"I'd pit a bow-necked Middlesex ox against any animal on this scurvy bowl," Thomas challenged.

"Thomas, the dire-wolf could take the head and horns of an Earth ox in one bite, and the whole body in two more," Paul assured him. "The lazarus-lion can take the much larger rambler's-ox in the same manner.

And the lazarus likes to eat people, not merely crucify them on the cliffs as the rouks do. The hydra can gobble anything in water, in one bite or several; and it can snap ten meters out of water. It has been known to take, in one bite, six men standing together some distance from the water's edge.

"And, Thomas, porches-panther kills and eats the direwolf .and the lazarus-lion and the rouk and the hydra itself. But all around us there are twenty other species of creatures capable of slicing a man up and eating him."

"I would bet that a good hunting man could live well here," Thomas said.

"You tell me of a plenitude of game. It might be an intense and rewarding life."

"I've lived here myself as a hunting man," Paul said. "There's a few thousand hunters still on Astrrobe. I lived with them a few months in my own time of hiding. Yes, the life is intense. The rewards are intangible, but for some they are deep. But those who follow the trade do not live to a great age. But those men have a certain flavor to them. I suppose the lazarus-lion thinks so too."

"Oh Astrobe, a salt that has not lost its savorl" Thomas cried. "The wonder of it. I had felt, for all its marvelous things, that civilized Astrobe was a little insipid. But it need not be. Here is salt for its salting. Here is leaven enough for the lump. We'll but see to a better blending."

"You cannot mean that Astrobe must be still more exposed to its back-landsl" Scrivener exclaimed. "These things are worse than any death.

They must be hidden away forever."

"But are we armed?" Thomas asked. "Someone was not thinking very hard, and I suspect 'twas I who was supposed to be doing the thinking."

"I'm always armed," Paul said, "with the short knife, the only tool that a feral-land hunter will use. And I believe that Maxwell is. He's been a hunter in at least one of his life aspects."

"And I am," said Evita. "This woman-child was a hunter more years ago than you would believe. It isn't for my own defense-I can witch the animals as far as I am concernedit's for the defense of Holy Thomas here."

They went down through some levels of the tree-complex. They came onto what was almost solid land, its presence being given away only by fitful breaks that showed still deeper worlds of deep roots and green darkness.

"There should be a being to fit this green darkness," Thomas said.

"Sextus Empiricus wrote that every environ must have its own sprite. It would be a weird one to fit the green underworld here, however."

"Call me not weird, good Thomas," spoke a green-colored voice. "And yet I'm sure that Sextus Empiricus wrote of me, and of you. You're -also a sprite, but one never sees himself as such. One believes himself to be a man if he is raised by the humans."

The green-colored voice came 'from a green-robed monk of the order of Saint Klingensmith. He was a blackish man (and yet there was a touch of deep green in his black) who winked at them and grinned. And they all stared at him, coming on him unexpectedly as they did.

"Preserve us this morning from dire-wolves and panthers and programmed things," he blessed them. "The latter are following you, you know. They're the hardest to evade and the hardest to rouse to; they have no scent."

"Whatever is a good monk doing in the salty woods of Astrobe?"

Thomas asked him.

"Holy Cathead, I'm fishing, of course! But what are fine people like yourselves doing here? There was an Old Earth Epic named Babes in the Woods. That is yourselves. I am Father Oddopter of the Green-Robes, and

now I see that you are not ordinary fine folks. There is Maxwell, the avatar who burns up his bodies, and we pray for him. There is Evita-child, who has become something of an archetype in the salacious dreams of the men of the orders, and she prays for us. She is a character in the folklore of the feral lands. There is the Paul, whom we know. He will suffer stark death in following out a mission and will never be told its purpose. And you, sir, the doubtful Thomas, are a revenant with a double sign on you. The Holy Ghost certainly chooses strange instruments. Sometimes I think He is out of his mind. And the two others, the nothing man, and the less than noth-'

ing man."

"Which am I?" Slider asked with a sour grin.

"Oh, you're the nothing man. The other is the less-thannothing. What?

He flushes with anger? Why is sheer truth so hardly embraced?"

And Scrivener was indeed flushing with anger.

"What in particular are you fishing for, Father Oddopter?" asked Thomas More the revenant with the double sign on him.

"You'll see," the monk said.

Circumstances began to assemble like cawing crows. Youhad doubted the color of the Evita's eyes, how they seemed now one thing and now another? Now they were green, green, the green of sparkling anticipation.

The monk wound a cord around his wrist and handled a harpoon thing a meter long. He peered into the green water with crinkling black-green eyes.

Then he dived, robes and all, as a hawk dives, powerfully into the green water. And there was a sudden turbulence.

There was a struggle of resounding great power under water, a startling force striking and rupturing something of very great weight.

The green-robe broke water again and surged up onto the rooty platform all in one motion. He drew up the cord with hands and wrists of such terrifying size that it seemed impossible that they should belong to him. The water was bloody and churning when he brought the thing to the surface and drew it half out.

It was a fat discoid thing, black and quivering, and one third of its circuit was angry-toothed mouth. It weighed a hundred and fifty kilograms and it could have snapped a man in two through the trunk.

"I called myself a fisherman on Old Earth," Thomas said in admiration,

"but I never, in my life took so grand a fish as: that. Days of my life, to see it is hardly to believe it!"

"Thomas, Thomas," the green-robe chided, "it's but the grasshopper that one catches in his palm to use on the hook. This isn't the fish. It's the bait."

The green-robe put three more harpoons into the creature that fought and groaned. There was something else now: great wings, as it were, deep under water and gathering for the pounce upward, the greatest wings ever.

The green-robe made the harpoon lines fast to various thick branches and roots. His giant bait was threshing and churning with two thirds of it in the water.

Then the green-robe leapt onto the bait creature, slashing it deeply with a hand knife. It bled in spectacular fountains of dark rushing red that exploded with the lustful smell of rampant iron and stripped green wood and battlefield stink.

From a powerful underwater organ the creature was roaring with a rage that set both the water and the air to reeling. The green-robe rode and slashed the pitching thing at great risk of limb and life.

"Devil, Devil, rise and die, come and find what thing am I," Evita chanted like a little-girl rhyme, but her eyes were green volcanic fire a billion years old.

"Hurry!" Paul shouted. "It's rising like a thunderclap."

"I know, I know," the green-robe crooned. "Holy Cathead, it does rise fast! But the last second is the best."

"Devil, Devil, come in hate! Take the fine Evita bait!" the wild-girl chanted, but her eyes no longer focused and she was frozen in hysteria.

The green-robe leapt clear from big bait-creature at the last possible second. Then the great thing swooped and struck upward: a thousand kilograms of center bulk that swallowed the trussed creature in a single gulp, thirtymeter-long tentacles that reached blindly for more prey, the big eye in the middle mad and livid with malevolence. The Devil! The main bulk was clear out of the water with the speed of its upward surge smashing the surface. It was but a lightning instant, but many things were observed simultaneously in that instant, not the least of which was the lightning itself-the corona-like discharge and blinding aura of the great sea-creature.

It was the hydra taking the bait.

"Now!" clanged the green-robe with the belfry sound of Saint Lo which is under water.

"Now!" Paul croaked like a rampant bull-frog.

"Now!" Evita sang in a voice that was green bronze pickled in brimstone.

They had spoken together, and no time at all had elapsed.

The three of them were onto the hydra before it thunderously shattered the water as it fell back from its great surge. They went with snake-like knives for the hydra eye and the brain behind it, feverish in their haste before the terrible tentacles could be brought to defend and to attack Hysterical battle, hooting challenge, high screaming triumph.

The hydra trumpeted with an anger and agony that stabbed through the whole feral region, killing small birds by the very pitch of the scream. It

submerged with the crashing fall-back from its great surge; and the three attackers stayed with it, cutting and hacking in near hysteria.

The hydra screamed under water. And after a while it rose again.

The huge tentacles lashed and writhed, but no longer with great power in them. The green-robe and Paul and Evita were through the giant eye and into the brain, cutting relentlessly and furiously. Evita had the head and most of her inside the big eye, and her chant came out of that cavity: "Devil, Devil, boom and belll Watch Evita give you Hell!"-the weird voice of a small child gone mad.

The hydra-devil groaned with an echoing hollowness that shook the whole region.

And then it died.

"Why, this is allegory acted out before my very eyes," Thomas exclaimed, and he was shaking from the passion around him. He was finding words to deny what he had seen.

"Enjoy it, Thomas, enjoy it," the green-robe cried as he leapt back onto the rooty platform, the almost-land. "Give it accolade. You were a London play-Boer, but you never saw so high and roaring a comedy as this. A man may not do it twice in one day. A strong body will stand it, but the emotions will not."

"It isn't real," Thomas said, "it cannot be real. It's but a grand illusion.

Look, our Paul has been drained, and he rolls his eyes like one half dead as he totters back onto the land. What is the content and real substance of this, Father Oddopter?"

"Why, it's the killing of the Devil, good Thomas. The Devil must be killed afresh somewhere every day. If ever he is not, then our days be at an end.

Say, he is a big one today, isn't he? He's not always a hydra, you know.

Some days he is a mad dire-wolf. Some days he is a porche'spanther gone musk. The Devil has his several forms, but we must kill him every day to limn his limits."

"Our good Thomas is not beyond hope," Paul panted as he came back from the deeper shadow world to one less deep. "You are not completely revolted, Thomas. You were near as impassioned .as ourselves, however you deny it. Golden Astrobe hasn't yet got you entirely in her effete wiles.

You weaken and you conform, and they seem to be winning you. But this will stand as a sign for you before you weaken completely. In this blood be you blessed, Thomasl"

"Ye be all daft," Thomas growled, uneasy, and yet somehow caught up into the blood-lust of the thing. "It is an unnatural satanic thing that happens here, and you revel in it. And the child-woman, has she gone brand-mad?"

"She's possessed," the green-robe said. And Evita had almost disappeared into the cavernous brain of the hydradevil. She gorged and reveled there.

"She has consorted with the Devil in his other forms," the green-robe said, "and there is a curious hatred and tension between them. I have never been on a devil-kill with the child before, but I have heard of them.

She becomes wild sometimes."

"You actually believe in the Devil here in the feral lands?" Thomas asked as Evita withdrew somewhat from the monster.

"What an odd fellow you arel" the green-robe Father Oddopter marveled.

"You have just seen us slay the Devil, and you ask whether he be. Do you not believe your eyes? Does this seem like an ordinary creature to you?"

"Newt ordinary, of course," Thomas said weakly, as though he were pleading a losing case in court "but by definition, it is within the order of nature, since there is na other order."

"Thomas, Thomas, you cannot win that little game when you make your own rules."

"I can understand how to the superstitious or to the ignorant "

"No no, good Thomas. Look at itl The ignorant Scrivener and the superstitious Slider are aghast at the violence of the thing, and they yet stand trembling. But they do not believe.

"The half-ignorant Maxwell also quakes, but he only half; believes. It is we of the intellect who believe what we see and feel-that we have drawn the Devil 'from his lair and; killed him. You do not believe it?"

"I do not believe it," Thomas said, but he was not feeling j particularly calm. "It's but a bloody, violent, and dangerous; sport you indulge."

Evita had finally emerged from the monster, glistening with blood and gore, and bearing a great arm-load of Devil ' brains. She was disheveled, and her eyes were completely `* mad.

And then in a flash they were no longer any such thing. She came out of her passion and seizure as easily as she would leap from a tree. She winked at Thomas, and broke into chiming laughter.

"My seduction of you is a little different from what I planned," she chortled. "I'll seduce you in mind and belief instead. Bodily I'd burn you up too quick and fry the poor, tallow out of you, Thomas. But this way we burn a brand on . your brain. Whoop! Imagine, a grown man too ignorant to believe in the Devil!"

You ever cook any Devil brains yourself? Don't knock it if you haven't tried it. Paul and the green-robe cooked the brains. They cased them in a ball of mud, and set it into a quickly-started and explosively hot fire of oil-dripping vines. These burned torridly with a staggering, almost emetic smoke-the water in them fighting with the oil. The whole thing gave off a brightness that was like sodium flame. They roasted the brains roaring for an hour, and then the ball burst open with a real explosion. There was the smell of sulphur in the air. And all was made ready.

With dishes of this sort, you like them or you like them not.

Scrivener and Slider would not partake.

Maxwell had to force himself. "After all," he told himself, "they are only fish brains. The rest is but the rough kidding of these feral people." But he liked them more and more as he ate them.

Thomas tasted in a surly manner, and out of curiosity. And then he was hooked on that bait. He welcomed them as one of the rarest and heartiest foods ever. They entered into him. Ah, the salt and the sulphur of them would stand him well in his crux hour when it came. By eating its brains, he would always have a certain mastery over this enemy.

Hydra brains were known in some of the mod places of Cosmopolis, but at fifty stoimen of d'or a kilo. The price was high there, and the brains were not; some of the old Devil always went out of them in the marketing and fixing.

Here it was finer, eating them new-killed, kilo after kilo to satiety. They needed no condiment. They had their own salt and sulphur.

Who laughs? Who laughs? None but a necromancer laughs like that. It was Walter Copperhead who came out of the jungle with eyes for nothing but the hydra. He had known, of course, the hour and the place of the Devil-kill. He would lay out its entrails and examine them, and try to unriddle riddles there, as though he were an old auger. And he was.

He built a sort of jungle winch with a counter-poise of straining vines and bent branches. He worked to lift the monster and disembowel it. The members of the party withdrew a space and left him with it. It was a private thing that Walter Copperhead did.

They traveled again after they had spent an hour or two in the fine talk that should always follow a fine meal. The green-robe Father Oddopter went with them, he having no home and being sworn to the rule of never laying his head in the same place for two nights. They came on other hunters and

fishers. They came on one bunch who were killing ansels and hauling them out of the water. This puzzled Thomas.

Rimrock the ansel was a creature of intellect, and therefore human. But these ansels, Thomas understood at once, were not creatures of intellect and were not human. The difference was clear on the practical plane, but the theory was not clear. Thomas was surprised that he felt no repugnance at seeing them killed. Nor did he hesitate to eat raw hacked-off pieces offered him. So he puzzled about it.

"There's a question I hardly know how to ask," he said to Paul. "Would Rimrock the ansel eat ansel?"

"He would and he has," Paul said, "but he doesn't care for it much. Says it's overrated. An ansel doesn't need ansel in his diet, but there's no repugnance. And an ansel who has crossed the line becomes an entirely different creature from a natural ,ansel. How the new species is acquired I do not know, but every species can tell the difference. A direwolf, for instance, will eat a natural ansel with as easy a mind as he'd eat a jerusalem coney. He'd also eat a transfigured ansel just as he'd eat a man, but he wouldn't eat him with as easy a mind. There is a difference between natural and transcendent prey, and all the meat-eaters know it. It is known that all animals are greatly disturbed in their minds after they have eaten humans, and Rimrock would be human by this test."

"The theology of it is impossible," the green-robe said. "It cannot be that a creature already in full life will sometimes receive a soul and intelligence, and yet that appears to be quite the case with certain exceptional ansels.

And I talked to your friend Rimrock today. He had gone on just a little while before you came."

They traveled again. And the mountains grew higher and came closer.

They traveled through the afternoon-stalked always by the Programmed Killers-and at dusk they came to Goslar the City of the Salic Emperors.

(Here follows History quickly given.)

The Salic Emperors had their origins as an underground university fraternity in Wu Town. Certain young persons, believing themselves daring, maintained a revolt, half-humorous, half-doctrinaire, and altogether brainless, against the golden mediocrity of Astrobe, the humanist planetary dream. Several of these young people then (two centuries before this telling) established the small town of Goslar and called it their imperial capital. Hunting families had accreted to the settlement for it was, in a way, central to the Feral Strip. It was here that the Dismal Swamps and the Rain Forests and the Savannas all came together; and it stood right at the foot of Electric Mountain, the first high pinnacle of the mountain complex.

Goslar now had about a hundred people, and a big shanty building that was public house, royal palace, hotel and skinners' center.

From the founding, there had always been one Salic Emperor in residence at Goslar. The present Emperor was Charles the Six Hundred and Twelfth; for no Emperor had reigned as long as a year, and many of them less than a month.

The automatic killers ,had assigned themselves automatically to the destruction of every reigning emperor. These Programmed Killers of Astrobe have been described as garbage disposals, as the ultimate police, as the precision wardens of the Astrobe Dream. They got rid of everything that stood in the way of that dream. They had been so constructed, and they had so propagated themselves and continued. On the breast of each Programmed Killer was blazoned the motto 1 have not been false to the Vision.

The sensing of these killers was faultless and relentless. Anything that threatened the Astrobe Thesis was the enemy and they would follow it to the end and kill it. They had never ultimately failed, though certain tricky persons sometimes eluded them for years.

A personal surrender was sensed by them. One who relented and accepted the Astrobe Dream, albeit interiorly and silently, was no longer hunted by them. The Programmed Killers could be destroyed. But at the moment of the destruction of any one of them, another one was created in a distant center and was given the same assignment.

And they had pursued and killed the Salic Emperors, just as they were pursuing and would finally kill every threatening member of the Thomas More party.

But there was a peculiarity about the succession of the Salic Emperors that paralleled that of the robot killer species. Whenever a reigning emperor was killed, his replacement was also created instantly. Knowing of the death by no orthodox communication (in several cases, knowing of it a few hours before it happened), the Salics at the University.. in Wu Town would hold instant convocation, by day or by night, and would select a new emperor in a matter of minutes. The new emperor would start on foot to Goslar immediately, without script or staff or food or coin or extra: garment, and would arrive in wild Coslar in about ten hours. He always traveled intuitively, since Goslar is not mapped. and the new emperor would never have been there before.

And so the dynasty continued.

Charles the Six Hundred and Twelfth had reigned less than twenty hours when the Thomas More party arrived. He had arrived in the darkness of the night before, and had been crowned by a dumb birdliming man.

(That be History longishly given.)

Charles the Six Hundred and Twelfth was about eighteen years old, a bewildered young man with a frightened smile. But he comprehended the party even as they approached. As Emperor he was infused with certain special powers of understanding. He beckoned the party to enter the big shanty building, and then motioned them to stow their gear against the walls and to spread straw for their beds, for this was hotel as well as royal palace.

Evita dropped more than fifty kilos of hydra Devil-meat into the big common pot boiling in the middle of the room. ' She had carried this lump, more than her own weight of very high meat, along with many other things, for the whole afternoon, and that over very rough country. She was as strong as a podalka pony.

And then the Emperor Charles began to give orders, as was his obligation and right:

"The Maxwell, the Slider, the Oddopter Priest, the Paul, the Thomas, and the Devil-girl may use the common room," the Emperor issued. They had not given him their names; but he was Emperor, and it was given him to know what things people are. Besides, Rimrock had been there before them and had told Charles the names and appearance of the members of the party.

"The Scrivener may not, however," the Emperor continued. "He may not use the common room. He must be lodged in the small machinery shed; and he will be fed there. He is not people."

"Are you a Programmed Person, Scrivener?" Thomas asked him. "I did not know that."

"I don't know whether I am or not," Scrivener lamented. "I've suspected it, and there's a family legend that we have some Programmed admixture. But why should it matter? There is really no difference any longer between Programmed and People. I wish I had never come on this miserable expedition, but I will not be treated as an inferior."

"I am the Emperor and I know these things," the boyish Emperor Charles the Six Hundred and Twelfth maintained to the party. "The Scrivener is a machine. And he will lodge in the machine shed. Let us not make a great noise over a little thing. It is only that definitions have lost their precision on Astrobe; and one duty of the Salic Emperor is to clarify and enforce them."

"Thomas, assert yourself and overrule this lout," Scrivener demanded.

"You are an important man, and I am a member of your party."

"I've had my own difficulties with high royalty in another place," Thomas said. "And the rule is, do not overrule them in small things; it is difficult enough to overrule them in great things. I do not cross royalty on minor matters. You are a minor matter, Scrivener."

So Scrivener went angrily to his lodging in the machine shed.

Charles the Six Hundred and Twelfth had been polishing the skull of Charles the Sixth Hundred and Eleventh, the Emperor who had been murdered on the morning of the previous day by the Programmed Killers.

The skull had been partly shattered by the mortal blow, and Charles the Present had to work carefully. He had a sort of white clay that he was using for paste; and he set the larger pieces into the break. Evita came and began to arrange the smaller fragments, cleaning them from day-old gore and handling them deftly.

"How is it that you are of high blood, Devil-kid?" the young Emperor asked her. They appeared to be about the same age; but if the legends of Evita were only partly true, this were impossible. "The whole wallful of skulls would protest your touching a sliver if you were not of high blood, but they seem happy in their niches. What? What? You were the consort of one of them? And that one is making for you as much song as a dead skull can make.

"But there is more than one of them crooning at youl You must be very oldl So oldl There is Charles the One Hundred and Twelfth himself stirring at you. You are Stephanie the green-eyed queenl But Charles the Two Hundred and Fifth is also chiming in and rocking in his niche. So you are Queen Brigidl And Charles the Three Hundred and Fifteenth is happy at sensing your presence. So you are Queen Candy Mael How could you be all of them? I called you Devil-kid and I was right. But they all love you." .

"I wish that were true," Evita said. "But you will notice that Charles the Three Hundred and Thirteenth has turned his face to the wall. Poor Charlesl It was all a misunderstanding, Charles, really it was. And the sounds made by two others are not happy ones. I have been as many bad queens as I have been good ones. I come often back to Goslar to renew myself. I've been a lot of queens."

"Be one morel" Charles cried. "The Oddopter priest will marry us at once."

"Oh no, my days of queening it are over. I have committed myself to the Thomas Adventure, and I will follow it the several months till I am released from it by his death. I doubt if you will still be alive then, Charles, but I may come and see."

The skulls made an impressive show in their niches on the rude wall.

Not all six hundred and eleven were there. There were, in fact, thirteen of them missing, and there were empty niches for them. These were the Emperors who had been murdered by being knocked from high peaks into deep ravines, or had been burned beyond recovery in fire traps, or who had died in some other demolishing adventure at the hands of the Programmed Killers. But most were here, and they provided the mnemonic for the great remembered oral history of the dynasty.

"More than one of you here is a Taibhse," Charles said. "I am Emperor so I am given intuition about such things. The Maxwell leaves bodies behind him, and the Thomas leaves heads behind. The Evita has lived too long to be so young, and I understand this less than the other cases. How do you do it, black-hearted kid?"

"Do you not learn anything at the university, Charleyboy?" she asked him. "Very long life has been possible on 'Astrobe for two hundred years.

They remain on the edge of the breakthrough, they say. But special breakthroughs have been made all through these two hundred years. I am one of them. But who wants it? they ask. Nine out of ten persons on Astrobe ask for termination long before their normal life term is run. They find life so wearying, the Golden Peoplel Hell, I don't. Perfection is all the more cloying the more it is perfected. I tell Holy Thomas that this thing, and not the Cathead and Barrio and Feral Strip revolts, is the sickness of Astrobe. The people are so weary of perfection that they ask termination at earlier and earlier ages. Many now ask it as small children. What is so perfect about a life that more and more people refuse to live?"

"I forget your legend, Devil-kid," the Emperor Charles said, "though I am certain that I knew it when I had to study the Legends of Astrobe in school.

Is there not somewhere in it the phrasèto go to Hell in a hand-basket'?"

"Yes, there is, Charley-boy. I was naive in my methods and in my direction of revolt," Evita said. "The teachers said that there was no Hell and no Devil, and this angered me; I knew that they were wrong; I had had some personal contact with both. They said that there was no sin. In particular, they said that children were not able to commit serious sins; and in this I knew that the teachers were sinfully wrong.

"I decided to go to Hell to prove them wrong. I decided to find the Devil.

What I found first was the old Evil Scientist of Legend, so contrived a man that he was a burlesque of himself. Yet he was a true scientist and a truly evil man. 1 consorted with him, and he did give me long life and an, introduction into certain aspects of evil. I was one of the first successful experiments in longevity. It takes a deep well of bodily and psychic energy to make it work, and I had it. At that time I thought that he was the Devil himself, and thatI was Faustina and had made a Devil's bargain.

"Well, he was sound in the biology of the thing, and gave me what I wanted. There isn't much demand for it' now. Èternal youth, who wants it?'

is the sneer. I did and do want it. For several centuries I have had it. Ali, the Holy Thomas and others smile. They do not believe my legend. They will not believe a legend even when they see it in the flesh."

"Quick-sparrow, you are not yet twenty years," Thomas said.

"Good Thomas, I am more than two hundred," the Evita _ answered.

"Well, I committed all the old-fashioned abominations in my search for Hell.

I indulged in 'fornication and pride and unkindness and intellectual contempt. But I didn't find Hell immediately.

"There is another legend about the boy who had to go clear around his planet to come to his own house. Then he recognized it for the first time. I

am the girl who did it; and I did find Hell. Golden Astrobe of the Dream is that Hell. I don't like it, and I never will; but Hell exists."

"But Golden Astrobe is perfect, child-woman," Thomas insisted. "It is all perfections rolled into one."

"Sure it is, good Thomas, all rolled into one package and . tied with a golden ribbon. I had been tricked by false teachers who use words to mean their opposites. So. have you been tricked, Thomas, and you should be too intelligent for that. Well, let them so misuse termsl Let them call things what they will. If the Cathead thing and the Barrio thing are Hell, then I am for Hell till a better Hell comes along. Buts I will not accept so extreme a Hell as the Vision of Golden Astrobe. It stiflesl It blows out souls like rows of candles!"

There were rows of candles there in the big shanty room, or tallow tapers at least, there in the place that was royal palace and public house and skinners' center, there in the big room that could sleep perhaps twenty people. And the rows of candles were blown out now and then, for the room was badly calked and the wind had risen outside.

A man came in.

"The ghosts are bad tonight, Emperor," the man said. "They have just eaten all the flesh of my wife and left only her bones."

"Well, I'm working on a king's charm against them, but I don't have it in shape yet," said Emperor Charles the Six Hundred and Twelfth. "The skulls of the old emperors are supposed to inspire me to it, but so far I get nothing but gibberish. I guess the ghosts will just have to be bad tonight."

"I'm kind of glad she's gone," the man said, as he took hydra Devil-meat out of the common pot with one of the big wooden forks, "but I'll miss her sometimes. We fought a lot, but there was never anyone so much fun to fight with. Now I don't have anybody."

"What is the ghost bit?" Thomas asked as he also began to dip Devil-meat out of the pot with a wooden fork. Then they all began to dip it out and to

eat.

"The ghosts are the same, or almost the same, as the Taibhse," the green-robe Father Oddopter said. "You being one, Thomas, should know a little what they are. They are animals or creatures or beings ripped out of their context and set to wandering. They are most often invisible, and at their most solid manifestation they are still transparent or at least slightly translucent, as are you by candlelight."

"There are such indeed?" Thomas asked. "Or are they mere country tales?"

"They are real, and many of them are angry at their misplacement. Will a country tale eat all the flesh off a person and leave only the bones?" the green-robe asked. "Well, I guess that is possible too. All things are. Of these ghosts, however named, we can only say that they be. In the early Natural Histories of Astrobe they were given space. Now they are not. But they are creatures with minds superior to those of animals, and of the order of men. They have bodies, however fragile and changing. They have been seen,and heard and felt. They have killed, and they have been: killed. Their flesh has been in that very pot there, but it: steamed away to nothing, leaving only an aroma. They have cities and settlements. Most often they are reluctant to approach human settlements (it may be true that they are kept off by spells), but sometimes they do come and eat flesh, all the flesh of a person, cleanly and rapidly."

"Is superstition completely rampant in the boondocks of Astrobe?"

Thomas demanded.

"Why yes, I suppose it is," the green-robe said. "The. psychic force, the libido, is completely rampant here, that 1 know. Once, I believe, that was true on Old Earth, and it lingered long in the Africas and Haitis of Old Earth.

You forget that the taming of the nature of this world has been of a very short time. The feral strips are the power-house of Astrobe. They are the key to the weather, and to the fertility of the land; to the water and to the water power; also to the power from the grian-sun. They are also, I believe, the psychic power-house of Astrobe, though their human per. sons are fewer in their thousands than is civilized Astrobe in its billions. Yes, superstition is very strong here, Thomas.

"If three persons of the feral strips imagine a thing strongly enough (however monstrous it may be), they can bring it into being. They can create a contingent body for any thing they imagine, and it will be inhabited by certain unbodied spirits here. I have seen it done. I have helped do it.

When children of the feral strips play `monsters,' they make monsters that can be seen and smelled, and which on occasion have eaten them up.

"Yes, here are all improbable persons and animals, spirits and half-spirits, clean and unclean; the archetypes of folk dreams; they are here alive, and often fleshed. Here there is superstition (the beyond-belief or over-belief) as a shaggy and pungent thing that leaves footprints and fang-marks. Every thought or inkling, suppressed as irrational in rational Astrobe, comes out here and assumes flesh. Why, there is a stock-breeder here who breeds, improves, and slaughters for profit a creature that had its origin in the nightmares of Golden Astrobe. It was banned there by group therapy. It came out here and became physical fact."

"Father, father, there are no brains in your head," Thomas chided. "I see that I will have to quarantine these regions much more tightly if I do become president of Astrobe."

"And I tell you, Thomas, that the civilized world of Astrobe is really of no consequence," the green-robe said. "It is but a thin yellow fungus growing

on a part of the hide of the planet. Should this shaggy old orb shiver its hide uncommonly but once, the Golden Astrobe civilization would be destroyed instantly. Bless this meatl It's good."

"It would be an act of charity to exterminate all the poor benighted persons in this area, and I will have to have it done," Thomas said. "Aye, the meat is good."

"You'll run into trouble with the ecologists if you go to exterminating all the feral people," the Emperor Charles pointed out. "The several thousand humans in the feral strips are part of the balanced ecology of Astrobe.

Destroy them, and the balanced plant and animal life will go out of balance; this great cistern for civilized Astrobe would be changed, and perhaps ruined. The scientists do not want that. We must be left here in such numbers as we maintain, they say. But we are not considered as humans.

We are rather animals to them, animals among animals; we are under the wildlife department."

"Fox-fink, I cast better lumps in the stool than the pack of you can say in a night's talk," Thomas said angrily, "and I'm called to do it now. Begging your pardons but I must go to the henry. Or is it called the Charles in this realm, Emperor?"

"Call it what you wish, Thomas," the young Emperor said. And then he winked at Evita a wink that was like lightning between them, and Thomas caught it.

"What is the levity here?" he demanded still more angrily. "Cannot an honest man go to the henry without being mocked?"

"It is only that there is a citizen of Goslar with an unusual means of livelihood," the Emperor said. "It is a trade that has been passed down from father to son. We will be listening for the lilt of your voice, good Thomas."

And Thomas went out puzzled to the henry.

The man who had lost his wife (all except her bones) now brought in a little barrel of green lightning.

"She did so love to get foxy on it," the man said, "and she will not be using it now. We will drink this night to my lost wife (except her bones), and praise her if we can find any words of praise for her. I cannot, but some of you are better with words than I am. I liked her, but I can't think of a thing to praise her for."

"To your wife, except 'for her bones!" saing Evita, and lifted the little barrel in very strong hands to drink from the bung.

The Emperor Charles did the same thing, and,. the greenrobe Father Oddopter, and Paul. But neither Maxwell nor Slider was able to raise the barrel to drinking height, and so were barred from participating.

Any others? Bangl Bangl You broach a bung and there're two who will be there immediately if they're anywhere to be found. Walter Copperhead the necromancer and Rimrock the ansel were in the shanty room.

Copperhead raised the barrel high and drank deeply. Rimrock, who had a peculiar physique, did it in a way that might seem awkward to a man, but he did it competently and gurglingly.

"Where have you fellows been?" Paul asked.

"Killing Killers," Copperhead whooped. "You'd none of you be alive this night if we hadn't. You're careless in your wanderings."

"That is a barbarous way to drink it anyhow," Slider bemoaned, badly hurt that he was barred from the festivity by his bodily weakness. "In civilized Astrobe, the mere touch of the electrode or electric needle will give a much finer effect, the golden glow. What are you, pigs, that you swig intoxicant in physical form?"

"Hush, half-man," the Emperor Charles commanded, and he raised his hand. "We listen."

And then came the high angry lilt of the voice of Thomas from the little henry out back of the royal shack. All the frustration of the ages was in that furious denunciation that Thomas was loosening on someone.

Evita and the Emperor Charles and the green-robe and the man who had lost his wife except her bones all went into spasms of laugher.

Copperhead's goat-guffaw was one of the great things, and the primordial giggle of the oceanic Rimrock was something beyond the comprehension of common ears.

"What is it?" Paul chuckled. "I hate to be left out of a thing."

"Why, Paul, there is that citizen of Goslar with the unusual livelihood,"

the green-robe chortled, hardly able to contain himself as the Thomas-voice rose even higher. "He sits on the pot day and night, and there is but one public pot in the City of Goslar. He will not move to give place till he is paid a coin. Threats and beatings will not move him. Only a coin. Hear good Thomas! What a fine angry voice he does havel But the citizen of Goslar has him where it hurts."

"Oh stop it. Rimrockl" Evita laughed. "You'll rupture yourself with that giggling."

"What a regionl" Paul sighed with a broken grin. "I could almost agree with Thomas that it should be more tightly quarantined. There is creative thinking at work in this, though. I'm not sure that I've ever met its equal in civilized Astrobe."

The angry voice of Thomas had died down to a bitter grumble. And after a bit, Thomas came back into the big room very red in the face.

"Does anyone here have a stoimenof detain?" he asked out of his red stony face.

Paul gave him one. It was a pewter coin of small value in civilized Astrobe, but apparently the dollar-in-use here in theferal strips. Thomas went out

again.

It is presumed that he paid the coin to the citizen of Goslar, was given access to the pot, and relieved himself. He did, at any rate, return to the big room in somewhat better humor, and yet with a certain reserve, as though defying them all to carry it any further.

"It all reminds me of something," Thomas smiled, though his smile was nearly -as crooked as that of Paul, and there was still a bitter rasp to his voice. "It reminds me of something for which I cannot find a name. I still believe that the Vision of Golden Astrobe is the perfect thing, and that the extravagances here in the ferals are monstrosities below the human level.

But perhaps the Golden Perfection should be suspended for about five minutes a day for the refreshment of the soul. Yes, perhaps it should."

Thomas was able to lift the barrel and drink from the bung, and it loosened him a little. Green lightning is fun when the Golden -Perfection is not immediately at hand.

Evita told the story of the Devil and the Wife from Culpepper, of what souvenir she took from him with a sharp knife, and why to say "hung like the Devil" means halfhung.

The green-robe told about the alien from Gootz who came to that very hotel in Goslar and relaxed in a pile in the middle of the floor. Sure they thought he was a great wheel of cheese lying there! And they sliced him up in a hundred slices, and each citizen of Goslar ate one. That alien from Gootz still raises hell with all of them. He cannot pull himself together, and he refuses to be ejected. All citizens of Goslar have a certain green look on their faces. That is the reason.

The Emperor Charles the Six Hundred and Twelfth told one. Walter Copperhead told about the fellow who courted the woman to get to examine her entrails. "I'll put them back," he said, "I'll put them back and sew them in again. I just want to go over them once." "No, no, no," the lady said. "Boy, I thought I'd had some wooly propositions before." '

Paul told one. The man who had lost his wife (except her bones) told one. And Thomas told a concatenated drollery with all the obscene parts in Latin. Rimrock told one, an oceanic spoof so outre that it took the breath away and turned the liver green.

Then the barrel was empty. At that moment the night guard of Goslar blew one blast on his trumpet to indicate that all was well with the night.

And after a moment he blew a little scurry to indicate that it was not so well as all that, that things were prowling.

The Emperor Charles and all the travelers went to sleep in the straw (a sleep broken only by the giggling of Rimrock from time to time: if something tickles one of those ansels he stays tickled quite a while), and the skulls of five hundred and ninety-nine emperors were empty-eyed in their niches on the wall.

Golden Astrobe was a creature with a fair face for all men to see. But out behind she had a sting in her tail.

7. ON THUNDER MOUNTAIN

THEY WAKENED to trumpets. Some were made trumpets indeed, blown by the night guard and the day guard changing places and by the special honor guard, and some were trumpeter birds set to going by the instrumental trumpets. The trumpeter birds were of better tone and timbre.

The Emperor Charles rose grandly to begin the second full day of his reign, if it should prove to be a full day.

"Not for thirty reigns have there been so many grand people in the court at Goslar at one time," said he. "Strike a medal for it, man."

"I don't know how to strike a medal for it," the man said.

"If you find someone who does, tell him to strike a medal for it," the Emperor said. "Put my own fine hand on it, and the motto They Come To Me Like Eagles. Why, here is a dead saint from Old Earth, the Devil-kid of

Astrobe, a necromancer of unlikely powers, a transcendent ansel, a priest of Saint Klingensmith, an avatar who burns up bodies, and pilot Paul who is a broken-faced old warlock. Not for thirty reigns have there been so many grand people at court at one time, and not for thirty reigns has there been so handsome an Emperor at the head of the court."

"How long a time has the thirty reigns been?" Thomas asked him.

"It has been what we call a rapid year," the Emperor said, "perhaps the most rapid ever."

The green-robe Father Oddopter of the order of Saint Klingensmith said mass for all the people in Goslar and all the people who came in at the news of it, a little over a hundred people in all. It was a simple and clear mass with a surprisingly intelligent sermon, and the uncanny miracle came shockingly and vividly alive at the consecration. It was as though the Heavens opened on command and the Spirit carne down-which is what happened.

Even the skeptical Thomas felt the stirrings of faith in himself again. It was a miraculous morning, so why not believe in miracles again 'for a while?

As he said, Thomas often rediscovered his belief for a little while in the mornings.

"What they do here at Goslar," the green-robe told Thomas after the mass, "is set up a token realm till the real shall be rediscovered. And the reality will be rediscovered, and the golden palsy will pass. Happy death for you, good Thomas."

"You are too rapid to wish happy deaths to persons," the Thomas said.

"And the mass this morning was a very old one. `For those here present who will die this day.' 'Twas meant to be addressed to a world, and not to small Goslar of under one hundred people where it is very unlikely that any will die this day."

"It was addressed to your party and to myself, of whom several will die this day. Were I not certain of this, I would have said another mass of the day. And the necromancer also. says that the most of us who go to the mountain will die this day."

"It was a pretty thing, it was a pretty complex of things," Thomas said as his early-morning faith began to withdraw from him again. "As a child I lived it, and as a young man I still respected it. In my maturity I still call it the Noblest of all Superstitions. The Church of the Saints lived quite a long while, and historically I seem to have an ironic part in it. It died meanly in civilized Astrobe, I understand, but I believe it will die more quietly and harmlessly here in the ferals. "

"You who are to die this year, know that it will not die at all, Thomas.

And know also that nothing dies quietly in the ferals. Whatever is set on here will shriek and shrill if it be killed, and it will return to life again and again. Even the meanest reptile dies hard in the ferals, and should a great thing do less? It will not lie down and die quietly, but why are you so afraid of being associated with superstition? Is it not a superstition of your own to climb the mountain?"

"Perhaps it is, green monk. It is an inner compulsion of mine, and I must do it. It is on this one thing that I fault the citizens of Golden Astrobe: they have never lifted up their eyes to the mountains. They are like blind men in this, but where are they mistaken? What if all in a world were blind to color except certain small boys? That, I believe, is the case on Astrobe; but it may make the color-gazing a mere boyish thing. What is the good of gazing at a pile of rocks? I will leave off such boyishness after I become world president. But this day I am hooked on the Mountain Bait."

"We be on our way, good Thomas," Rimrock the ansel interrupted. "If I go up the mountain, it will be by a watery way I know on the inside of it, up the mother spring, for it is a mountain-full of water. The Copperhead will be on the mountain top before you, and will perform certain abominations there. And then he will leave. We ride shotgun for you this day again."

"But it will not help greatly. Most of you will still die on the mountain,"

Copperhead the necromancer said. And the two of them were gone.

"Shall I kill the Scrivener thing in the machine shed?" the Emperor Charles the Six Hundred and Twelfth asked.

"No, of course not," Thomas answered sharply. "Release him to me. He is one of my advisors and a member of my party. It was rather a cruel trick to shut him up in the shed last night, and I do often find such royal wit tedious."

"But he is a machine and not a man," the Emperor insisted. "And as a machine he has, though he may not know it, a sender in his head. It works without his knowledge whether he is asleep or awake. It is his code signal, and every Programmed Person (even if he be nine-tenths human and one-tenth Programmed) has it. It is by this code signal that the Programmed Killers so easily trail you. It is suicide for you to climb the mountain; you know that, Thomas. The Programmed Killers will encircle the pinnacle and have you caught in the tall trap."

"I worry about them not at all," Thomas said. "I am a special case and I may not die till my own special time has come."

"Ah, but they will kill members of your party. Promise me this, that you will at the appropriate moment kill the Scrivener and cast him into a ravine to mislead the Killers, and then to make your mountain climb quickly in the interval."

"No, I will not cast one of my own members to the dogs. We will climb the mountain as though there were no such things as the Killers, and for me there are not."

"I repeat, they will kill members of your party, Thomas. And several of these are sometimes citizens of my realm. I will charge you with their blood."

"You will charge me with nothing, Charles. You are only a fuzz-faced boy playing in a cluttered back-yard. Yes, I suppose that some members of my party will be murdered by the Killers. So let it be. It will be a winnowing, a

cleansing. Those who die will be those who deserve to die. I myself will not be false to the vision. I'll blazon the motto on my own breast. The Killers strike only those who are a threat to the Golden Life of Astrobe.

"I'd kill them too if I knew which they were! I welcome the Killers! They seem to be mistaken as to my own role and purpose, but they are inhibited from actually killing me when the time comes. If there are enemies of the Great Thing in my party, let them die!"

"I expel you from this realm, Thomas Morel" the young Emperor cried sharply. "You're a more mechanical thing than any machine. You're a string-puppet that's left off being a man. What vision could anyone be faithful to who would sell his own brothers and partisans to the Killers? I thought you were a man, and you are only a mannikin. Your man'sparts were left behind when they brought you forward through time. You stink up my woods and swamps! Take your machine things and your cravens and go! We will see if the real people follow you.

"What? I'm aghast! You go with him, Devil-kid? He's worthless, you know."

"Yes, I go with him, Charles 612, and I can't make you understand,"

Evita said. "He is not entirely worthless, or not forever. He only seems so now. Yes, he's become a dull lump of metal and will never serve for a knife now. But he will serve for something else. I've followed worse to the end, and his end won't be very long now."

"Not in the ferals it sure won't be, not in Goslar," the Emperor said. "But you others, wait, wait! How are you so wrong? The Paul and the Oddopter go with him also. Why? Why? You have heard him throw in with the Things, and leave off being a man."

"And I have heard distant bells tolling, and seen a world arise in the sign of the Rolling Head, Charles," the greenrobe said easily. "Believe me, there is more here than is apparent. It's my business to be with this lost sheep this day. He is the wooly ram with the double sign on him. He is in Scripture.

And he must be saved, not for himself, but for the double sign on him."

"But it's to your own death, Father Oddopterl As the Emperor I am given insights, and I see your death today because of him. Even in martyrdoms there should be a certain economy. Do not sacrifice the worthy for the worthless."

"No man who swells up in such towering anger as the Thomas does now is worthless, Charles. He is a cloud full of lightning, and not at all as facile in this as he seems to be. I will stay with him this day."

"I say he's full of hot wind and nothing else," said the Emperor Charles.

"He cannot lighten and he cannot thunder. He can but fume in his wrongness. I say he is a wether and no wooly ram."

"Were I not suddenly caught in my own uncertainty, I'd settle with you, fuzz-face," Thomas said closely. "I was never one to be certain that I was right for long, and I'm not certain now."

"He is an instiument, Charles. Try to understand that," said Paul. "And I will stay with him also."

The Emperor Charles withdrew in blazing silence. He had Scrivener released to them, and his contempt for they scorched the very grass when he did so.

The members of the party, not very cheerful or muich in accord, began the ascent of Electric Mountain. All were ashamed, and they did not know of what.

Yet it was a stimulating morning and a challenging climb.. And the death-threat did call up excitement in most of them. Maxwell and Slider didn't like it. But there was a curious change in Scrivener, who was, perhaps, a Programmed Person.

"This is my test, Thomas," the Scrivener said as they climbed. "I have been rethinking things all the night. Whether I am a Programmed Person or an old-recension human I do not know; nor how much I may be of each.

But I have found something out here that tells me that you yourself are wrong to hold the Dream of Astrobe as perfect. It is not. It is only half the thing. It must be conjoined to some other thing that I do not understand yet.

Perhaps, after all, we must kill the Devil afresh every day. You are an old-line human, Thomas, yet I accuse you of setting the human thing too low and the mechanical thing too high. So, there are machines that walk like men these several hundred years, and perhaps I am one of them. But there are also men who swing against their own kind and become more partisans of the machine than the machines themselves. Do you not be one of theml

"So, the Programmed Killers hunt down and kill only those who are a threat to the Astrobe dream? And you all believe that they will discount me as no threat? We will see who they will kill and who they will pass by when they have us in the trap. For you lead us to the trapping, Thomas. I tell you that I have become a boiling threat to one part of the too-easy thing."

They climbed. And then they climbed more steeply. The vegetation fell away and became more sparse. Now they were climbing a Devil-tower of magma and iron, rough and sharp and blood-drawing.

Above them the mountain spire was a pinnacle as a cartoonist might draw one, sharp and needle-like as a burlesque of a spire, and with a clean white doughnut cloud encircling it and settling down a third of the way from the top.

The green-robe caught a Commer's Condor in a flung net. They tore it apart and ate it raw. It was past mid-morning, and they had been climbing hard.

"There is another doughnut-shaped cloud around the spire," Evita said.

"It is a black one, and below us. The Programmed Killers have come in full patrol and have the peak surrounded. They climb not so fast nor so well as we do, but they climb more relentlessly and they do not rest. This isn't the death I had planned for us all, Holy Thomas."

"Never mind," said Thomas. "We will rest. And then we will ascend again.

Electric Mountain, they call it, do they? Aye, it tingles and is full of sparks."

There was an excitement entering them all as they rested there.

"There is a story that one of my grandmothers told me when I was small," Scrivener broke in with a nervous halfmetallic voice. "It is from her; I believe, that I have my mechanical descent. In the early days, she said, the mechanical men, her own people, wished that they had a mythos as the humans had: a mystique, a god or a founder hero, a sleeping king perhaps.

This, of course, was before the humans had given up the old hero tales entirely.

"Every Old-Earth Nation, my grandmother told me, had its mythos of a sleeping king who would one day awaken and rule again in a new golden age. Of sleeping kings there was Alaric the slayer of Rome, who was buried underneath the Busento River (its course changed for the burial and changed back again to flow over him), and he was to arise from it again one day and lead the Gothic element, that shaggy thing that is the basis of a dozen peoples. There was Arthur of Britain in kingly sleep in an ensorceled room at the bottom of a lake. There was Brian Boru of the Irish buried on horseback in a pit with great stones heaped around him, and when he wakened he would scatter the stones and ride again. There was the Cid of the Spanish, not buried at all but riding forever a horse in death-sleep over dark moors in Estremadura. There was Barbarossa of the Germanies asleep at a table in a cave in a mountain and his beard grown through the table."

"There was Henry of the Tudors immured in a room with six wives, and they not in accord," Thomas laughed.

"There was Kennedy of the North-Americas riding forever in an open automobile in an obscure place," Scrivener continued. "There was Roadstorm the early freebooter `King' of Astrobe and all scattered Earths, marooned in unknown orbit in his small spaceboat the Star King. All of them are to return and lead their people once more. How can people form themselves without some such mythos?

"The early mechanical men of Astrobe wished to find such a legend in their past. They needed a sleeping king for their own solidarity. They sent to Old Earth to see if they could not find some such mechanical sleeping king of their own to build a mythos upon. They went backward and further backward through lands and times to find the first mechanical thing that they could regify.

"They settled on an old small broken gear train that had been taken from an Egyptian tomb. It had hard-wood cogs and bronze bearings. Its use was not known. It was a clumsy thing, but it was the earliest thing they could find in the true mechanical spirit. They brought it to Astrobe and said that it was their sleeping king. They said that it would awaken one day and lead them. And the human people snickered at them, at us, for it.

"Then Ouden came, the Celestial Nothingness. Tut away such toys as that,' Ouden said. Ì am your god and your king.' And so he has been god and king for all Programmed Persons from that day till this. And quite soon he will be god and king of all beings of every sort. But we were his first people, we the inechanicals. He grows and grows, and all the other kings die.

"But last night I rejected him! I thought about it all the night, and I rejected him. So, what am I now? I am not machine and I am not man.

What is left to one who has rid himself of the deified nothingness? I cannot be left with nothing. It was the Nothing that I rejected."

There was no response to this shrill little pleading of Scrivener. They all looked at him with half-shut eyes that frightened him. Scrivener had become alien to both his recensions.

They began to climb again.

Astrobe below them was a golden haze, and greenery underneath the gold. But here the air had become blue. Like Earth air, Thomas thought.

They had ascended at least two kilometers in vertical distance. The mountain spire was irregular and rough. There was always hand-hold and foothold, but often of slashing sharpness.

And high above them on an outcropping there stood a boy or a young man. He seemed a spire-mirage, for there are such. But how had he got there and they not seen him before?

"It is my brother Adam," Evita said. "I love him, but he is a bad omen.

His coming always signifies death, usually his own, but he often takes others with him. He comes often during times of crisis, and he dies in bloody battles for what he believes is a cause. He is very good at dying. He does it a lot."

The doughnut-shaped cloud around the spire above them had turned gray and blue and black. It was full of sparks and fire. It was now an electric torus.

A Commer's Condor, swooping very near to them on black wings, cried out croakingly, "Thomas More is a fink!"

"What did that fellow say?" Thomas shouted. "Was he not a bird? How could he cry out at me? But I heard him and saw him."

"No, you didn't, Thomas," the green-robe said. "You didn't believe the things that you did see yesterday and the night; and now you see and hear things that are not there. This was hallucination. From here on up we are in the region of hallucination. The most rational man ever born, if he ascend here, will suffer such. They are fluffs of ball-lightning hovering about Electric Mountain; they are wind and spark and charged air. The shapes they take are both objective and subjective. One can shape them a little with one's own mind. I once met a talking horse on the ridge right above us, and talking horses are not able to scramble up this high on the spire."

They came up to the boy Adam, and he joined their party silently. So handsome a boy, though his sister Evita had once said that he was completely empty-headed. Never mind, he maintained his silence, so who should know? He moved well, he climbed well, it was said that he died well.

He could have been the statue Greek Youth except that he seemed Jewish.

The spinodeltoid and posterior trapezus (the bowbending muscles) were well developed, and the bow had never been used on Astrobe. Ah, he was old statuary all right, quite well done. He was nude and nobody noticed Had he been nude in all his other manifestations?

They went up and up. They came through the gray torus cloud and into other clouds that were gathering. The continental layout was open below them. It was now clear and bright below them, and misty only in the little cone above them.

With a shiver of triumph they came to the top. It was a crooked-shaped plateau, an iron-rock slope that looked like sponge and smelled of ozone.

And someone had been there before them, very recently.

The one who had been there was both necromancer and haruspex, and his recent studies were still spread out on the iron-rock. But how had Walter Copperhead gotten there before them, how had he slipped down through them again, how had he avoided the Programmed Killers (if he had avoided them), and how had he managed to slay a giant rook? It was the entrails of a rouk, the largest bird of Astr-obe, that were spread out there.

Elephant entrails were as nothing to these. Surely he had found the answers of riddles here. If they are not in the entrails of rouk, killed and spread out and studied on the top of Electric Mountain, then they are not anywhere in the art of haruspices.

"Bless him, I love him and he loves them," Evita said. "I'd leave him my own did I know that he will die before me."

And another sort of entrails were spread out for them to see. It had come on first dusk as they stood there, and they drank in the view as though it were new apple-wine. It was the entrails of the planet below them.

There were the Ferals, and the Glebe, and the String of Cities. There was the black-green Astrobe of the feral strip they had just traversed, and the golden Astrobe of the cultivated regions. There were the great golden cities at their close intervals. And there was black Cathead and the gray Barrio.

All of them giant things 1

The branch of the sea that cradled Wu Town and ended in a splinter of estuaries and canals at Cathead was a blackblue-green monster, writhing with strength and dotted with huge sea-harvesters. There was Cosmopolis standing high and wide in a special golden halo-the heart of civilized Astrobe.

"The Reparation Tower, which you see on the eastern fringe there, is the highest structure in Cosmopolis," Evita said. "It was built about a hundred years ago by one of my sons who was planet president. He had some bad ideas, and he did not (in spite of the Reparation Tower) offer enough reparation. I have had bad luck with my sons who achieved world-presidence. I have not much more hope for my adopted son Thomas here."

"The brat-child," Thomas asked Paul and the green-robe in an aside, "is she really of an unnatural age?"

"I don't know, Thomas," the green-robe said. "Thirty-five years ago when I first saw her she was of the same apparent age as now. Remember that almost everything is possible."

"Remember also that she lies a lot," said Paul.

One could almost see the feral strips feeding the cultivated Astrobe and the golden cities with their controlled counterpoint ecology. The muscles and the nerves and the veins of the planet were revealed from this height.

One could see the black cancer of Cathead eating into the land and the sea and clouding the air. And yet, as the green-robe had said, the civilized Astrobe was only a thin yellow froth on a small part of that world. The old orb-animal had but to shiver its hide and all would be gone. And it looked like a hide-shivering evening.

Electric Mountain could be climbed; it took nothing but strength and endurance and a little care. But could anyone ever climb Corona Mountain there that was sheer and over-hung and appeared on the verge of toppling?

Or Magnetic Mountain? Great Sky over us, look at that torl Or Dynamo Mountain (which bad been the feminine one in the mythologies, and the other three her consorts), which was highest of them all, who should climb her? These four high spires were known as the Thunder Mountains, a startling group.

In the rough diamond between them was a country so harsh as to make even the feral strips look tame. This was deeply muscled country that had sinuous depths and involved hills and ramparts. It was prototype nightmare country where everything was bigger and woolier. It was heap upon heap, and spires rising in clusters to the cross-buttressed heights of the mountains. And now, as the darkness began more to deepen, all the high places were outlined with an electric blue glow.

"It uplifts the soul," Thomas said with some awe.

"Be careful, little Thomas," Evita jibed. "What has uplift to do with the golden mediocrity of Astrobe? With the blessed levelness? And the soul, Thomas, is it not an obscenity and a superstition, except for a little while in the morning?"

"Push me nowt so far, brat-child. I say me my words and I think me my thoughts, but to what should they correspond? And yet 'I can see that, when I become world president, these high feelings will have to be leveled down. They become too rich for the imagination."

"Aye, Thomas, you'll tell the mountains to lie down like puppies," the green-robe said. "And the lightning, you will tell it to get back in its sheath.

Do you not know that this also is a part of the controlled ecology of Astrobe?

The high wild feelings attract a very small number of persons, and they repel the others. And only a very small number of persons are needed here for the balance. The persons who hold these tall feelings are regarded as animals among the animals, part of the fauna-balance of the wild lands.

Even the high lightning here (which you will be amazed at very soon) is treated as a commodity like any other commodity. It is packaged and shipped down to golden Astrobe, packaged as raintrapped nitrogen and shipped by natural flow to the ultimate consumer. That is all it is-from your viewpoint, not from mine-but it does come in a flashy package."

And very soon the lightning did begin in spectacular earnest. Corona mountain drew bolts out of the sky that appeared a hundred kilometers long.

The persons of the party seemed transparent or interiorly illuminated from the intense glow of it. It is odd when you can see the bones of skull and rib-cage of a companion by a flash so bright that it has the properties of penetrating rays.

Then the bolts of white and gold fire began to whip from peak to peak. A bull-whip thirty-five kilometers long snapped from Corona Mountain to Magnetic Mountain with a crooked light that literally blinded them all for a while. Here was the mystery of motion, the old paradox solved, a whip of light going so fast that it was in more than one place at one time. It was on every jag and crag at once, and yet it was but a single point of light, only a streak in being of simultaneous appearance. Or was it the empyrean itself, the infinity of blinding light that is everywhere in the outside but is seen only when the false sky is ripped open for the blinding moment?

Then Electric Mountain itself was struck by a bolt that boiled the air and melted the rocks, and the thunder-clap knocked them all to their knees.

Thunder-struck, they were literally astonished (which is the same thing latinized), impaled and numbed in every sense by the blow that shook the mountain.

"Ah, what can come after such a blow as that?" Thomas sighed.

"From below," the boy Adam cried out. "It comes a thunder with more sulphur in itl They strike while we are blinded and amazed! Man ramparts!

Roll bouldersl Topple them!"

"Who's been doing the thinking for this outfit?" Evita shrilled. "I'd intended to, but we've all left our wits. The iron dogs are on us! Are we people still, or do we fall to them?"

The Programmed Killers surged up from below while total darkness alternated with white light and black light, all of them blinding.

"Not me, you tin scurrae," Thomas shouted, "not me, you things, I've nowt been false to the vision. I've been false to everything else." He sent a small boulder down on them in a two-handed heave. "I'm not so partisan of you as I was, tinhorns. You make a mistake, and it is not to be tolerated that someone makes a mistake as to myself. Not me, you clanking fools, not mel I'd never threaten the Dream of Astrobe. Leave off!

"No? You will not? Have at it, then, you monster machines! I'll battle you to any end you want!"

Thomas roared and carried on; others fought silently; but the battle was not going well for his party. The boy Adam, faster and more mercurial than the rest of them, toppled one of the Programmed Killers backwards, and it fell a thousand meters through the glancing and sheer darkness. And, at the same instant and in a distant place, another Programmed Killer was created to take its place and was given the same assignment.

Paul and the green-robe, Scrivener and Thomas, Maxwell and the Devil-kid Evita, rolled down boulders on them and fought down on them from above.

"Drive down in the narrow slot between the neck-piece and the lorica or breast-plate," the green-robe shouted, and he had lashed a hand-knife onto a pole to make a spear or pike for just such driving. "There is a nexus there, a relay center. Get them there in that narrow slot, or they get us wherever we stand!"

"Ah, I am the one they disregard," Slider said sadly, a whispered regret that cut through the bedlam. "So, I am no threat to them at all? I thought that I would be. I'd gladly die, but I do not like being treated as though I were already dead."

"We've changed places, you whelp," Scrivener howled. "Who's the man now? And who's the machine? Me they do not disregard! I threaten their thingl I oppose it as strongly as the roughest man in Cathead. Backwards and down you go, you clanking Devil! I'll battle you all while there's life left in me."

But it was only for a little while. And then there was no life left in Scrivener. He had opted for a man very late, and the machines knew the diagram of him as a machine. The Programmed Raiders smashed Scrivener dead there. Every flicker in him, both of man and machine, came to a stop.

The battle in the sky still dwarfed the death-battle on the mountain spire.

The thunder burst ears and knocked the breath out of body. It scrambled wits, both human-chemical and programmed gell-cell mechanical-magnetic.

The light from the sky turned ordinary light black, and there were big empty grinning faces in the sky like high cliffs that had been there always. Big faces that had always been there, but never seen except by the most intense flash of the insane lightning.

"It's the many faces of Ouden, their great Nothingness and King,"

Maxwell cried. "Where is the face of our King? Would we know it if we saw it?"

And now the lightning had reached hysterical heights, as had the thunder and the relentless assault of the Programmed Killers. Bleeding ears and blinded eyesl And the rock-iron surface slippery with the entrails of those who were first ripped apart.

"On the third next bolt we go down," Evita cried to Thomas in a sharp underneath voice that got through to his stunned ears. "You and the Paul .and the I. The others are already too blood-drained and broken to get through."

"What, brat? Go down where and how?" Thomas croaked as he was being overpowered and near split open himself.

"Your brains, Thomas, use them. We go then or never. Be a man and think like a man! Follow your intuition when the moment comes, and it will be narrower than the lightningmoment."

A blow that literally burned the eyes and choked the lungs with an intake of lightl A thunder-smash that knocked them all flat, men and machinesl And they were to it again after the narrow moment. The boy Adam died in glorious gore, howling defiance. He was good at dying, Evita had said. He had done it before.

A second bolt coming at the same time from the sky and from Corona Mountain! Rocks melted and ran like water. The thunder-shock like a deadly blow in the deep bowelsl And the green-robe died of a smash between the throat and the lorica. He died loudly but not unhappily. He was a good one. "Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melebisedech," Paul gave his requiem. "Watch to your left there, Maxwell!

Oh well, never mind then. Too late."

In the darkness deep beyond belief, Maxwell's body had been smashed before Paul's warning could be heeded, and his odd spirit had been sundered from that broken body. Never mind. Maxwell had a trick of turning up again. An oddity of his.

"Be paralyzed now and be you transfixed forever," Evita warned in the low voice. Now it was at hand, the last narrow moment at which even mad escape could be thought of.

The third bolt, ripping from Corona Mountain to Electric Mountain, blinding and transfixing machines as well as humans for the much less than an instant of it.

Down! Downl With all mad speed, down, and one slip is hurtling death.

Down during the light that is more blinding than any darkness; down, using a narrower moment than the lightning-moment itself. Down through the darkness that is darkness indeed. Down through the clap that stuns and

knocks out both sensors and senses, already down a great hurtling drop before the instantaneous blast of the thunder.

Then continuing down for a minute, for a quarter, for an hour, discovered and howled after and followed by swift iron trackers.

Down onto the lower plateau and down again, while a part of the Programmed follow them closely, and the rest complete the tall trap on the pinnacle to mutilate and record what is left: three dead humans, one dead hybrid whose final pattern shows that he opted for human late, one gibbering creature still alive but disregarded, since he represented no threat to the Dream or to anything.

But three of their prey have escaped them, have fallen like lightning down the spire in a lightning-instant.

Never mind. If the Programmed do not get them this night, they will get them at another time. And the advance scrim of the Programmed have not given up on getting them this night.

Thomas and Paul and the brat-child Evita were all strong on their legs and possessed of a sturdy life-urge. They were no longer in the middle of the towering thunder-storm and they felt certain that their senses were returning to life after their stunning. The storm was above them now and they were no more in the middle of the display. But they were charged and full of spark. They glowed with coronas about them, blue electric auras.

They shined and hissed like ghosts.

They came down into the wild savanna country just as the sky broke open. It was a torrential downpour, a giant rain that could not be exaggerated. A part of the neat balance that kept Golden Astrobe golden, still it was savage water from the upped abyss, the deluge itself.

They went at a great pace all the night to escape it, and every brook was a raging river. It was already false dawn before they could get a glimpse of each others' faces, and all three of them, Thomas and Paul and Evita, had suffered a deep change. They had been transfigured on the mountain.

They were not quite the same people they had been. Something new had been burned into them.

They crossed the last of the feral strip, moving in an agony of weariness and blood-loss, still pursued by the mechanical killers (as all would be pursued for the short remainder of their lives), still in the black afterglow of the dizzy light. They were alive, but not entirely. There had been tracers burned into them. Defiant though they might be, they could no longer be their own people untrammeled. They were marked.

"Really, it was a sight worth seeing, once," Thomas said. "I have found the strong skeleton beneath the golden flesh of the world, the iron in the marrow, and the deep green blood. And the something else, the void. Ali, those grinning empty faces up in the sky that were all the Nothing Facel"

"Not up in the sky," Evita said. "Down in the sky. We be upside down on Astrobe, and we saw down into the ultimate pit when we were on the mountain."

Crossing the last of the feral strip, followed closely and hounded, in the very early morning they came into giant Cathead from the backside.

8. BLACK CATHEAD

THOMAS HAD been lingering in Cathead for several days. Evita and Paul had left him: to do his work for him, they' said. Kingmaker sent word for him to get back to Cosmopolis immediately; he stated that it was time Thomas campagined, or at least stood by to be shown.

Thomas sent back word that he had been proposed fog job of physician, and that as such he intended to examine; the disease, at least superficially.

He bad been around the fringes of Cathead before, on its borders with the Barrio,. and into certain of its tortuous suburbs. Now he had to s study the sick giant itself, that mad thing that was eating a into beautiful and rational Astrobe. He had to find out riddle of this bleak monster city.

Cathead was larger even than Cosmopolis. It had a population of more than twenty million persons. And it had grown to that in twenty years. It was human misery on the largest scale ever known anywhere.

Take it 'from the outside and in general: Cathead on the Stoimenof Sea; it connected with both the Grand, Trunk Canal and the Intercity Canal; it had a hundred navigation channels; it was astride all the lines of civilized As- -' trobe like a huge spider. It had trememdous industry, stark and noisome, not hidden and disguised like the industries of the Golden Cities.

It was an angry town built out of extreme poverty with all commodities produced at a much greater real expense than in any of the Golden Cities.

It was a noisome place based on noisome cargo. But Cathead produced nothing that was not produced elsewhere in Astrobe, nothing that was not already present in abundance. Cathead handled all the products of marine mining,: for the Astrobe seas were vast chemical vats sharper than the'

seas of Earth. But the other cities also handled all the prod-, acts of marine mining, and without the repulsiveness of the: processes of Cathead.

Manufacturing techniques in Cathead were archaic, inhuman, and very expensive if human years and lives were counted in the costs. And cheap clean processes in all the other cities stood in ironic parallel to the Cathead thing. First stages of some chemical processes as performed in Cathead were so raw that they were absolutely deadly. People died like day-flies in these industries, and they lived miserably while they lived. And there was no need of Catbead at all.

But some millions of Citizens had left the Golden Cities of Astrobe, had refused advice, had defied threats, had climbed barricades (in more recent years) and run the gauntlet of gunfire to get out of the pleasant Golden Cities and into bleak Cathead, to suffer there and to die there. And the lives they left for this were the most pleasant lives that men and machines had yet been able to devise. It seemed a poor trade. This was the riddle of Cathead and the sickness of Astrobe.

The people had entered the Cathead thing by free choice, and they could give it up any instant they wished. The people who coughed up their lungs at the terrible labor there were low poor people who could be high rich people by sundown tonight if they wished. They were hard surly folks who had entered the slavery deliberately, and more were entering it all the time. They went out in the sea-harvest boats that made old-fashioned garbage scows seem like dream ships. They worked twenty hours a day on the noisome sea, and three years of such work would kill the strongest. But the Golden Cities had automatic sea-harvesters. The slagworkers in Cathead lost all their coordination; they stuttered and slobbered and could not speak or think straight. The gellminers coughed up blood by the bucketful and went insane at the work within eighteen months. The extractors of oxypyrites had the most terrible labor of all, absolutely killing.

And the curiosity of this is that there was no market or use for the product, no pay for the work, no reward of any kind. Men borrowed and begged and sold their children for food, and went to the non-paying labor that maimed and killed, they turned blue and went mad from it. The product was piled up useless and poisonous, and the corpses that were the by-product were piled nearly as high. And yet more than half a million men, women and children worked their twenty hours a day extracting oxypyrites, and wagered whether starvation or the poison would kill them first.

Take it from the inside and in particular: Take the Rat Castle. This was thirty-five stories high and a hundred and fifty meters on a side. Once twenty-five thousand people had lived closely crowded in it. Now there were perhaps some remnants of those twenty-five thousand skeletons, and there were one billion rats. They covered the outside so that the color of the old building could not be told. They throbbed inside in carpets a meter deep, and covered the walls like live paper. They raided out from the Rat Castle, killing and eating children by the thousands, killing women, killing grown men, covering them in a devouring cloak and shrinking them down to bones. They went right through wooden buildings. They ate mortar as though it were cheese and weakened and entered and toppled brick structures. They ate three thousand people alive every day in Cathead.

There were upwards of a hundred other tenements in Cathead taken over completely by rats, but none of the magnitude of the Rat Castle itself.

Well then, why the unburied bodies that were everywhere in Cathead?

Why the putrid flesh bubbling and near exploding in the sun? Why the odor that would actually fell the poor people with the strength of it, and these the lungers who could stand anything? Why did the rats not clean up the bodies?

Why, most of them they did. This remnant, the few hundred you would see in a morning's stroll through the lanes of Cathead, were too strong for the rats. There are poisons and poisons. There is flesh so poisoned in the death of it that even the rats will not touch it.

Take the sadists' dives. Take the children sold into them. From one of these, in quite recent years, the Devil himself ran retching. Take the rat-hunters and the rat-butchers and the rat-markets and the rat-eaters.

The only way to stay ahead of them is to eat them first. Take the day of the yellow flag (usually Monday). That means that the plague itself is loose in Cathead. It will usually run its course, take its toll, and pass on within four days. And then it strikes again and the yellow flag is out once more.

Inoculation is available and free to all persons in Cathead. But few will accept it.

Take Bethelem which began as a mad-house, grew to a mad-farm, grew to a mad-district, and is now more than one third of all Cathead. Eight million persons live in the Bethlehem district. Every one of them is insane to some degree. They get along about as well or as badly as the other citizens of Cathead.

"Copperhead," Thomas said, for they walked together. "Look at the men working on that projectl There's no organization at all. A good swine stewart from my day could order things better than that. Why?"

"They suffer more at the badly ordered work, Thomas. Extreme suffering is a part of the Cathead thing."

"Walter, why are the bodies left unburied in the lanes?"

"A reminder of death. Follow it out far enough and it becomes a reminder of life."

"Copperhead, is there not one ray of sanity in all this? Why do the people not return to the golden life?"

"This they choose."

"But it spreads, it spreadsl More leave the world of perfection and join the misery every day."

"Better a life of misery than no life at all."

"But there is life, the most wonderful life ever, in the golden cities. These dying miserables can receive it back within an hour. Why don't they do it?

Damn you, man, you're laughing at mel"

Thomas talked to some of the leading men of Cathead: Battersea, Shanty. He asked them again and again the reason for it. They looked at him with curling contempt and made cryptic remarks that he couldn't understand. They turned aside and spat green every time he suggested that the Cathead lungers should return to civilized Astrobe.

"Fool!" said Battersea.

"Blind man!" said Shanty.

"I must have caught fools' fever to talk to you at all," Thomas swore. "I would say die in your misery and be damned to you. But it spreadsl It's eating up the world. I swear that when I come into my power I will raze every brick and stone of this place and destroy every unreconstructed being here."

"Blind man," said Shanty.

"Fool," said Battersea.

Thomas looked up Rimrock the ansel. This was one mind in Cathead he respected. He found him (tired from three day's diving) in a fan-tan parlor where the ansels went to be fleeced.

"Good Thomas," Rimrock greeted him, "I preach you as the hero above all heroes to the people and ansels and other creatures of Cathead. I tell them all, as the Battersea also tells them, that you are, as of now, a total fool, of course. But I tell them that you will be given one moment right at the end of your life when you are not a fool. I tell them that many entities do not have even one moment when they are not fools. I build you up every way I can."

"I hold you less a fool than the other men of Cathead, Rimrock," Thomas said. "After all, ansels are not much regarded in civilized Astrobe. You do not have the golden life to go back to."

"Have I not, Thomas? You never lived in the ocean depths or you would not say that. It has its own perfection there, ; and I left it willingly for this. "

"Why, Rimrock? It seems that that would be a life o£ total freedom. Why trade it for the slavery and misery o£ Cathead?"

"No, Thomas, the life in the ocean depths is very like , the life of Golden Astrobe, too much like it. I lose my identity there. I am one of the school, and my mind is merged into the school mind. I never regretted becoming a man; I: never regretted becoming a Cathead man; but you set me, too low when you imply that I haven't given anything up. I've given up as much as any of them. Though, of course, there was a certain ignominy in being taken and eaten for a fish, which might have happened to me in my former state."

Thomas left all those hard-heads of Cathead in disgust. They had been offered happiness on a platter again and again, and they had rejected it for misery. They were killing themselves for no point at all, or for a childish point. And they were poisoning and destroying a whole world with their

madness. They had to be exterminated, like the rats that they refused to exterminate.

Thomas walked long and he thought hard. He grew sick unto staggering

'from the surroundings. He was the doctor, and the sickness made a strange insane appeal to him to let it live and let the host die.

"It would be intolerable if there were something valid in all these miserable people and their thing, and it be beyond my comprehension," he said.

A poor woman reached out and touched Thomas as he walked in a muddy lane in the outskirts of Cathead.

"You will be king for nine days. Then you will die," she whispered. She was crying softly.

"Make me no salvator, you witch," he grumbled. "I'll have nowt to do with the High Fate business."

In his walking Thomas came onto a small medieval castle dwarfed by the giant shanty tenements of Cathead.

"What is it the building here?" he asked a coughing man. "Is it a show-house? A hobby? Is it the residence of some old fogey? Does anyone live here?"

"Nobody lives there," the coughing man said. "The Metropolitan of Astrobe dies there."

"Sure the cranky old man is a long time dying," said Thomas.

He knocked at the door of the old buzzard roost and there was no answer, except perhaps a low moan and rale inside. He opened the door and went in. He went through the first and second rooms without finding anyone. Then he came to a room with an old battered bed with a faded royal canopy over it.

A very old thin black man lay in the bed. He showed all his bones; he was no more than a skeleton. There was a fetid odor, and Thomas believed the man was dead.

On his finger the old black man had the fisherman's ring such as is worn by only one other. There was no one in attendance on him. This was the Metropolitan (the last of them, it was said), the Pope of Astrobe.

"Dead, are you," Thomas said. "Well, you've lived a life. A Dutchman I knew would have liked you to paint as you lie there, skeleton though you be.

You're a striking man, little as there is left of you."

But the old Metropolitan was not dead. He began, eyes still closed, to speak in an old sort of liturgical canto.

"Deus, qui beatos martyres tuos Joannem et Thomam, verae fidei et Romanae Ecclesiae prineipatus propugnatores, inter Angles suscitasti; eorum meritis ac precibus concede; ut ejusdem fidei pro f essione, unum omnes in Christo e$ieiamur et simus."

"Your eyes are closed, but your voice is good and you seem to recognize me," Thomas said. "I assume that I am Thomas, but who is Joannem?"

"Saint John Fisher," the Metropolitan said. "You have saints'-day jointly."

"Ah, yes, lost his head just fourteen days before I lost mine, I'm told. I have never heard the collect of my own mass before."

"Damme, man, who has? Save from the other side."

"Have you no followers? Are there none to attend to you?"

"But certainly I have followers, Thomas. I have five or six followers left.

Someone looks in on me every few hours. I have everything I need."

"Have you food and drink?"

"I have, but no stomach left for them. I am eaten up. In the cabinet there, pour yourself a large glass of wine and myself a small one.

"Can you open your eyes?" Thomas asked as he poured out the wine.

"I can make the muscular effort, but it is to no avail. I am blind."

"So this is the way it ends here? You are the last of them?"

"No, I am not the last, Thomas. We have the promise. , We last till the end of the world."

"You yourself die soon, old man."

"Quite soon, Thomas. Thirty hours before yourself."

"I'm minded of the words of a partisan of mine, since turned strange and useless: `But we are not the world! We are quite a different world, and no promise was ever given to us.' What say you of that, good Metropolitan?"

"Nonsense, nonsense," he said, "we have the Promise. It was given to us here on Astrobe in these latter days, given in a queerer and more flaming way than you could imagine. Know you that Christ has walked on Astrobe in human form, in the company of Saint Klingensmith and others.

Know you that the burning promise was given, and the flame begins to rise."

"In your five or six followers?"

"Those in the immediate neighborhood, Thomas. More than a hundred left on all Astrobe. It will grow. If you are of the Faith, then the very stones and clods of Astrobe will sing of the Promise to you. If you regard all such things as legends, learn then and regard the legends at leastl You will find here a richer legendry than ever greened Old Earthl"

"Go to sleep, old man; it's all finished."

" 'Tis never finished, Thomas, 'tis never hopeless. You are a living witness to what you cannot see. You, you ferretfaced little man, you became a saint."

"How can you know I'm ferret-faced, blind man?"

"You are the blind man, not L" And the old skeleton was laughing.

They drank the good wine and talked a while. Then a coughing young man came in to attend to the Metropolitan. He was still filthy from work.

"Good the day, Thomas," the young man said. "Sometimes the old man is crazy and sometimes he is not. Be patient with him."

Thomas rose to go.

"Turn, God, and bring us to life again!" the old Metropol blessed him hopefully.

"And thy people rejoice in thee," Thomas gave him the response. Then he left him.

"The last of them," Thomas said to himself when he was out in the roadway again. "This is the way it ends here."

Sea-gleaners were just bringing in a scow-load of Dutchfish to be ground for fish meal. It was not really brutal work by Cathead standards, but it was plague day and three of the men had died. The scow-master stripped them of their boots (dead-men's boots are lucky and there is a regulars market for them), and then rolled the three bodies in with the Dutch-fish. He buried them in the fish, but half-heartedly, not caring much.

The buyer came onto the scow, surveyed the take, and saw a leg sticking out and the outlines of all three bodies.

"We'll weigh them along with the fish and take them," he said, "but I'll have to dock you a stoimenof detain for each body. They just aren't up to the fish in phosphor and sulphur. And they are hard on the grinders."

9. KING-MAKER

"IT is unexpected that you do not come through on Replica," Cosmos Kingmaker told Thomas. "Your voice comes through wonderfully, the people standing with you come through, but you do not appear at all. I don't believe your invisibility on Replica is entirely due to your being a man out of the past. You're solid enough to the touch. And then, you may not know it, about one person out of a hundred does not come through on Replica. Of course you'd come through on the old Video-Vision, but that had only two dimensions and carried to only two senses."

"It's probably an advantage," Thomas said. "I sound better than I look."

"Yes, it seems that it is an advantage. It adds a little mystery to you. You are quite in the public fancy now. There are always intangibles at work in a thing like this, but it is going much more successfully than we had hoped.

Your animal and your mistress help. People instinctively trust a man who has an animal and a mistress. The Higher Ethics crowd has swung to you on their account."

"Kingmaker, you're crazy. I have neither. Oh, you mean Rimrock and the child-brat? But Rimrock the ansel is a man and not an animal."

"And the child-brat is a woman and not a child, Thomas. Dammit, my father had her once. All the lies about her aren't lies. But they both have popular appeal, Rimrock and Evita, and they can both talk for you with the damnest lefthanded eloquence ever heard: Almost everyone on Astrobe had them on Replica last night and they threw the whole planet into a delightful panic. The people are completely taken with the sweep of their talk. Fortunately, they do not seem to grasp the meaning. Both your Things are heretics to the Dream, Thomas, and they would be dangerous if they were understood. There is a lot to your doxie besides her paradoxes."

"She reminds me of my youngest daughter," Thomas said, "but she is not so well brought up. Kingmaker, cannot something be done about the Programmed Killers? They nearly had me last night again. Let them go kill someone else for a whilel They make me jumpy. Whether I have nine lives

or not I do not know, but they have now made nine attempts on my life. And they become trickier. They aren't mere machines as I understand machines.

They learn and adapt, and they aren't avoided by the same trick twice. I am not a threat to the Dreaml I love it. I am an intense partisan of it. I also in all honesty could blazon on my breast 1 have not been false to the Vision.

There is something wrong with the programming of these things."

"No, Thomas. It is impossible that anything should be wrong with their programming. Thomas, the Dream is in trouble, and any man by some quirk of circumstance may be a threat to it. But the Programmed Killers are too mechanical in one way; they take propositions too literally. We will guard you, but the judgment of the Programmed Killers must be respected.

We must be careful not to break their spirit with undue frustration."

"I believe that I am winning," Thomas said. "I get the smell of Victory."

"Oh yes, we'll win," Kingmaker said. "The trick is not to appear to win too easily."

"How is that, Kingmaker? I was a politician in my normal life, and we said Win First, Make Adjustments Later. I'd never lose anything from any reluctance on my part."

"There are certain parties that we do not wish to accrete to us, Thomas.

They will all swing to a clear winner and hug him to death in the closing days. The ones who always make: me uneasy are the Hatrack Party, and the Kiss of Death Party. And I am a little leery of the Third Compromise Party.. They hurt you when they come to you. We want our hands unbound when we go to work after we have won."

"You want your own hands unbound, Kingmaker. You'd bind mine a little."

There had been various methods of election on Astrobe; and there had always been a jungle of parties, with a man being permitted membership in

many of them at the same time.

Once it had been One Person One Vote, an idea that had been brought from Old Earth. Later had come the weighted vote, by which every voter was given the full rights he was entitled to. A man might be awarded additional votes for distinguished service-public, private, scientific or ethical.

Most ranks carried with them a number of votes. Entertainers of various sorts might receive additional votes as accolade. Wealth was a two-bladed sword, however. A man like Kingmaker might have had a thousand votes; but another very rich man, who shall be nameless here, had had only one quarter of a vote. He was not popular in his wealth.

Citizens of Cathead and the Barrio had had only one quarter of a vote each, they being under blanket penalty. Ansels and other citizens of intelligence but not of human form had had only one eighth of a vote each.

Nevertheless there had been a scandal when certain shrewd ansel leaders went down and registered and voted millions of wild ansels in the ocean depths. Their votes had finally been disallowed. It was declared that only Astrobe creatures of the landliving sort might vote.

Finally the Vote itself was done away with. There was no way to modernize it. It was a relic. Everything was now left to the sensing machines.

These worked on the auras of every person of Astrobe, for a running record of all their nuances was always kepthowever far away they might be.

It took very little adaption to add this burden to the machines.

The sensing machines could assess and compile the weight of opinion and choice in the totality of the minds on Astrobe. At the zero hour they took their reading, and it was the correct reading. Every conviction, every inkling, every resolution or irresolution of every mind on Astrobe was given its proper weight.

And the machines could not be tampered with. Their scanning was perfect. They weighed everything properly. This combined the best elements of all

systems. A person of very fine intellect and well-studied judgment would have more effect on the scanners than would a joker with a head full of notions. Persons of strong personality and vital character naturally weighed more in the machines' totals then did lesser persons. But frustration and confusion of mind subtracted from the body of a personal opinion.

This was the Weighted Vote carried out with honesty and justice.

There was only one thing wrong with this arrangement, and it could not be the fault of the machines since they were flawless. Cathead and the Barrio came to have undue influence. It was almost as if these regions had a disproportionate number of persons of very fine intellect and wellstudied judgment, and this was not possible.

A modification of the system was being worked out. judgments and decisions not in accord with the full Astrobe Dream were to be discounted or thrown out entirely. But there had been. difficulties in this. What was involved was that, sooner or later, there must be a definition of just what the full Astrobe Dream consisted of. The modifications would not be worked out in time for the coming election in which Thomas More was involved.

But the Parties-who could ever make sense out of their jungle? The Center Party, of course, was Thomas' own, and that of his three big sponsors. There was the First Compromise Party, the Second Compromise Party, the Third Compromise Party; there was the Hatrack (or Conglomerate) Party, and the Solidarity Labor Party; there was Demos and the Programmed Liberal Party; there was Mechanicus and Censor and the Pyramid; there was the New Salt Party and the Kiss of Death Party; there was the Intransigents and the Reformed Intransigents and there was the Hive; there were the Golden Drones, and the Penultimate and the Ultimate'

parties. It sometimes seemed that there were too many of them, but they all had their programs and their platforms. There were the Obstructionists and the New Obstructionists. There were the Esthetics, the Anesthetics, and a splintery group called the Local Anesthetics; these latter were jokesters and so automatically their opinions counted for nothing on Astrobe, though the party was allowed to register. There was Ochlos, which carried the special blessings of Ouden. Several of these parties were for Programmed Persons

only;òne, the Unreconstructeds, was for humans only; but most had a varied membership.

A crank got in to see Thomas More. He was not a wildeyed crank. He was dull-eyed and he spoke in a singsong voice.

"Thomas Momus, the Big Boys' Toy," he began rather rudely. "I am the leader of a certified party, and the law obliges you as a major candidate to give me a fair hearing."

"Right, a short fair hearing it shall be," said Thomas. "What is the name of your party?"

"It's the Crank. I organized it and named it. I am the Crank and I make myself heard."

"And how many members has the Crank?"

"Only myself, doubting Thomas. You may wonder how I was able to get a one-man party certified. Well, the ways of bureaucracy are strange. An application, timed just right, will sometimes slide through in the dark. My program is simple: I battle that pair of insufficiencies, Humanism which has no meat, and Materialism which has no bones."

"That's good," Thomas said. "I always liked a good round phrase. It doesn't mean anything, but I suspect I will use it myself in my next speech."

"I see the parties at an end," the Crank said. "Some grow old, some develop quirks, some catch the biliousness of repentance, some begin to apply words and thoughts too literally. All are dying. Soon only my own party will remain."

"Ah well, what is your party for?"

"It is against all false things, doubting Thomas. I believed it a mistake when pornography was given equal time in the schools with ethics, and both compulsory. I believed it a mistake when the law was enacted that perversion and normalcy should be given equal space and time in literature

and on stage, though at that time normalcy gained by the ruling. I think it a mistake that marriages may be terminated by an Evaluator against the wishes of the parties concerned. I think it wrong that nothing may be taught in the schools that is not in accord with the Golden Dream. I think it wrong that a law should be able to deny offspring to private persons. I believe it was a serious error when the Psychologs were made a privileged class with powers of entry and seizure. I believe that the human person should be inviolate, and that mechanical tampering with the brain of an individual should not be allowed. An adjustability chart should not be everything, particularly when it cannot be adjusted. I believe that a man should be allowed to choose his own occupation and his own unhappiness. Do you not believe as I do?"

"No, I do not, Crank, on no point whatsoever."

"It is no wonder that they called you the doubting Thomas on your home world."

"But they didn't. You have me confused with another and more famous man."

"You are not the Doubting Thomas, the Apostle who betrayed the Christ?"

"No I am not. You are badly confused."

"So are a lot of people, then. You owe your sudden surge of popularity to this false identification that has been hung on you. They've made you out a great hero, the betrayer of an old mountebank. Who are you, then?"

"I'm a stranger from another time who was brought here to give testimony to a great thing. I do so. I am in love with the Dream of Engineered Humanity."

"I have no faith at all in Engineered Humanity. I am neither humanist nor materialist. I am a heretic:"

"Why do you not go to cancerous Cathead and live with your own kind?"

"Because that life is too hard. I claim the right to protest. I know that my talk is the dangerous sort. Men have been beheaded for such talk."

"I think not," Thomas said. "Just why they are beheaded I don't know, and perhaps I'm a man who should. Now then, I have given you a short fair hearing as the law requires. I do not solicit the support of your party, though, in all honesty, if it had more than one member I might. Here, here, good contrivances, throw this fellow out!"

And a couple of contrivances, Programmed Persons, came to pitch the Crank out.

"I hate it!" the Crank roared. "I do not so much mind being booted out by a good human toe-it has happened to me often enough. But I hate to be kicked out by a machine. Damn all mechanicals to the reclamation heap!"

Thomas was on the campaign trail and he enjoyed it. He was annoyed a little by the Programmed Killers always in every audience he addressed, ever ready to rush the podium and kill him swiftly; but he provided himself with a screen of retainers to keep them off. He was annoyed a little by other Cranks, but he was good at putting down hecklers. And he was good at the rhetoric business; he was indeed the noblest rhetor of them all. He had the straight clear touch and an intricate lash to his tongue.

"I cannot really move mountains," he told one audience. "Hell, a man'd strain himself on a thing like that. But I can move this world-ahead. Is not that much more important? I come to implement the Astrobe dream.

Perfection itself is in stages. We ascendl Obstacles shall be removedl All unhealthy growth will be excised. I preach sanity of mind and body and society, and the perfect symbiosis between humans and Programmed. We come to the high plateau, we lie down in green grass-no, belay that phrase; perhaps it has not a progressive meaning on Astrobe. We come to the stage of dynamic rest. All things flow into us and we all become one. Minds and bodies merge."

And he continued in that happy vein for above an hour.

"You were talking nonsense, you know," Paul told him after that particular speech. "I wonder if you were even listening to yourself."

"You didn't like me, Paul? I liked me. And yet I was bothered a couple of times."

"By what, Thomas? You of the golden mediocrity should not be bothered by anything."

"Paul I said words and I said words, but there were other words that I did not say."

"What are you trying to say now, Thomas?"

"Somebody else spoke some of those words out of my mouth."

"Oh, that! I suspect they've been doing it to you for a long time, and you just haven't been paying attention. You've been saying many things, publicly and privately, that don't sound like you. It's one of the oldest and easiest tricks of the Programmed. They crawl into your mind at odd moments and take control. It's only a mechanical trick that they have.

Surely you've heard of it before."

"As one hears of everything. But it never happened to me before so obviously. Those words were thought in my mind and said out of my mouth by someone else. I resent it a little."

"Why, there's nothing to it, Thomas. Kick them out. Your mind is your own. They plainly can't stay in your mind if you don't allow them to. Kick them out. Sometimes they'll stay gone for as long as ten minutes. It's all a question of will."

"That's what makes me feel uneasy. I haven't as much will as I used to have. And I'm not sure that a strong will is commensurate with the Astrobe Dream. After all, I should be submerging my own will to the group will."

"Holy hoptoads, Thomas, you begin to sound like one of them. Be a man."

"Why, no, I believe that I should leave off being a man absolutely. We should all strive for the synthesis, part man and part Programmed. We have to submerge ourselves in our mechanical brothers for the good of all."

"They'll eat us alive if we do, Thomas. They never back up; they're into any opening we give them. Where do you get that bit about leaving off being a man absolutely?"

"Oh, those were some of the words that someone else spoke out of my mouth in my speech just concluded. They're true, though, and the audience liked them. We have to be more flexible Paul. This hasn't been easy for me, coming from Earth. But I learn to give in on one thing, and then another,,"

and then another."

"And then on everything, Thomas."

"I didn't like the Pandomations at first. But I learned tolerate them, and I can see that, when I become more perfected, I will love them. And at first I felt that there was something very wrong with the Open Mind Act. Now I can see how essentially right it was."

"Nobody but a filthy fruit would submit to either, Thomas."

"Watch your talk, Paull I'm a solider fellow than you are. I'll thrash you."

"You can't, Thomas. You have left off being a man absolutely."

The Pandomation was a machine available in various dinner booths, and many persons had them in their homes. An early critic, with no real understanding of the purpose or practique of this marvelous machine, had called it "peeping-tomry earned to the ultimate." It was an unjust criticism.

The Pandomation, the machine in accord with the openmind policy of Astrobe, was simply a machine for permitting the curious to look into a variety of rooms, at random or according to selection. One could look into the private chambers of the citizens and their wives and watch them at: their home-like activities. One could look into any room anywhere on Astrobe,

except for less than a dozen restricted rooms-certain semi-public meeting rooms of leaders. This device was a strong adjunct to knowledge, as it permitted all interested persons to know all things about everyone. I was surely in accord with the Astrobe aspiration: "That we be all ultimately one person, that we have no secrets whatsoever from ourselves:"

But it was not used as much as it had once been. The general public hadn't yet come to understand its fruitful purpose. With many it had reached the point of boredomand yet how could anyone be bored by looking at the activities of his 'fellows, the other aspects of himself? Here was a man and wife, here was a man and mistress, here were lovers.

There could no longer be secret lovers. The device was no longer limited to rooms, but any point indoors or outdoors in all civilized Astrobe could be dialed by anyone, except for the very few shielded areas.

The Pandomation was only the first step: The Open Mind Act itself encouraged further inventions and found fruitful use for many already in being. The subtitle of the act, 1 Have As Much Right In Your Mind As You Have, expressed the beautiful new concept. Now mind-scanners were available for everyone, and recalcitrants who resented having their minds invaded could be cited for it and haled into court for antisocial acts.

"We are all the same thing. We are identical," ran part of the wording of the act. "How can all minds become alike and merge into one if each aspect of that ultimate mind is not free to examine every other aspect of itself?"

It was a staggering thought, one of the culminations of the Astrobe dream. And it had been a little difficult for Thomas More, coming from a bleak period of Old Earth, to accept all of this immediately. But did he not adjust to it rapidly and neatly?

In another speech, Thomas coined a happy phrase, or perhaps somebody else thought it in his mind and spoke it out of his mouth. "I desire to be all things to all men." It was sheer magic. Of such things are kings made.

Thomas had won, and he knew it. Everything was going wonderfully for him and for his. He was at home in the heart of Golden Astrobe. He had

become the eloquent spokesman for the great thing, for the only thing. And he had thrown down the glove in challenge to the one serious sickness of Astrobe.

"Repent or be destroyed" may have been his greatest speech. He left no doubt in the stubborn men of Cathead and the Barrio what he meant.

Millions of them still maintained their way stubbornly in their error, but some thousands of them reentered the golden life of Civilized Astrobe. It was a trend, though a weak one. But the resolution to solve the problem was not a weak one. Civilized Astrobe had the science to destroy Cathead and the Barrio utterly. And Cathead and the Barrio did not have the science to fight back. All it took was a strong leader, and Thomas had announced himself as such. Compassion would be misplaced.

He thrilled the whole world when he spoke to them, still, invisible, on Replica. "It is no longer the Greatest Good for the Greatest Number. It now becomes the Total Good for s the Merging Singularity. And when we are all One, then comes the Great Inversion. We become a thing that is yond Number and without a Name."

After this, the Programmed Killers still followed Thomas, but with a difference. They watched him still, but they smiled at him quizzically, and they did not threaten him.

So Thomas would be King, which is to say president Astrobe.

And it is as easy to make a king as all that? Sure it is. It's all in the tune you whistle. It has to be just right, right for its time, and with the special lilt to mark it off. But it's the tune that takes the people. Hit it right, and you can make a king every time.

10. THE DEFORMITY OF THINGS TO COME

BUT THERE was something in Thomas that did not lie down-and play dead as easily as all that. He was the revenant with, the double mark upon him, and the old part of it surged up . in him now and almost tore him apart.

He was off in a walking afternoon nightmare, not knowing what he did where he was. He was riven in his own self, but he had lost the way forever.

That was the odd thing about this: that Thomas have afterthoughts on the matter. And afterthoughts were supposed to be banished from his brain.

They had taken him over completely and were sure of him. But they shouldn't have been.

He could revolt yet: shrewdly sometimes, blindly sometimes. He could almost become aware that he had been taken over.

There were hidden areas in which, for all his strong profession of faith, he did not yet fully accept the Astrobe dream. There were even areas in which he remained a private person though feeling in his taken-over brain that it was wrong so to hold onto a piece of himself. And now he found a lucid moment when he could stand back and study the behavior of his curious self.

"It is still odder that I should be taken in my own trap," he said. "Look, Thomas, myself, my me, what was it that I did in my other life for a bitter joke? 1 invented the damned thing! Was it not myself who coined the Utopia? Did I not know that I used fools'-gold instead of real gold for the coining? What has happened now? How am I taken in by it? What am I, God, that I make a sour joke and in so doing I create a golden world in the future and then stumble into that ridiculous future? Was other writer ever damned to live in a sly tale that he had made himself? Was other lawyer ever cursed to find the legality for his own joke? Was other chancellor ever required to administer a world that he had made in derision? So help me Godl-if I live beyond my second death I will pay more attention to what I do.

" Ìt is not real gold,' I tell myself. It is bogus stuff that I picked up out of a ditch and molded for a jibe. And it has turned into a whole world, my sick daydream? Why, I find that it is real gold after all, and I have made a world out of it, and I stand a fool from every direction."

Somebody had dialed Thomas, perhaps at random, perhaps to monitor him, and was trying to come into his mind.

"Be gone," Thomas said loudly. "Be gone I say! Yes, I know that it is wrong to bar anyone from my mind. I know that you, whoever you are, have as much business in my mind as I have. Bear with mel Bear with me! This is a writhing thing and I must wrestle it by myself. I'm an unperfected man, and I must still have a private moment now and then. Be gone. I shut you outl"

The prober left the mind of Thomas angrily, and Thomas felt bad about it.

"It will look ill," he said, "if the incoming president of Astrobe is haled into common court on a complaint under the Open Mind Act," he said.

There was a rustle and noises behind him, and it began to worry him.

But he had other worries as various things fought in his mind.

"It is beyond belief that this world should be true," he said again to himself. It seemed so grotesque and sourly comic when I invented it. I wish I hadn't read so much, particularly after my first death. It addles my brains to think that there were some who really advocated the sick thing. Well, it's come onto me so I will live in it. Let the things in my brain tell me again how wonderful it is! All glory Ouden the everything-in-nothingl

"No, no, it's all wrongl" Thomas broke away from the thoughts that tried to pull him under, and went running and stumbling along and crying to himself.

"It is snakes writhing in my headl It is not valid thoughtl How have I been taken in? Me, a man who could always see a low trick so far a way off !

How have the snakes gotten into my head anyhow? Did I stand like a scared sheep and let them enter? How have I become unmanned? When I was a boy I believed in God. When I was a man I still half believed. How have I been hooked by the Big O, the gawking Omega, the vile Ouden-Nothingness? Who would imagine that as a mature man I would worship so empty a god?

"Dangerous thoughts, thesel For now my heel-hounds have turned dangerous again."

Thomas More, all but declared president of Astrobe, had been walking in and out of a daze in a place he hated and despised. What had drawn him there? Now he was in a weird settlement between big Cathead and Wu Town, the least golden, the least committed of the great cities of Astrobe.

He was conscious of the stench of Cathead when he heard again the hair-raising rustle and clatter behind him. He ran.

The Programmed Killers had sensed the change in Thomas. They no longer smiled quizzically at him while they watched and waited. They had never ceased trailing him, and now they remembered why. He had changed again, whether temporarily or permanently was not their affair.

Now they moved after him to kill him.

"I'm lost," Thomas howled. "Mind, do a flop-over! Return my trust in the thing. Snakes in my brain! Chime out your glad tidings again. Tell the world that Thomas is again faithful to the Vision. Tell the clanking things that I am no threat to anything, and that they be a mortal threat to me."

Thomas slipped and fell, and was barely up in time. He was running hard, and they were hard behind them. A sturdy runner can outspeed them for a very little while, but the programmed are tireless. It was unnecessary to lose them. Thomas tried to fathom out or remember streets and alleys that he had never seen before. He was lost, and his pursuers were not. He knew that some of them had peeled off from the group and were circling around somewhere. No matter where he doubled back they were likely to have him in a narrow passage.

Then suddenly he was defiant, .and his craven fear had become repulsive to him.

"Snakes in my brain, out, out!" he bawled. "I'll nest you no longer. I'll die a man if I do die here. And I'll know I was right the first time. Damn, it was always fools'-gold, and I knew it. Fools'-gold and brimstone it was. I'd

rather be a Cathead lunger coughing up my life's blood than be king of their folly."

But he would be nothing if he did not shake the Killers. He'd cough up his life's blood quicker than the sickest lunger in Cathead. There was a clear way ahead, and the vision of a region he knew, and there was a dead-end alley, a trap, to his left. Thomas lunged for the clear way, but he turned into the blind alley.

"No, nol" he swore. "I do not want to enter this alley. It is a dead-end, a death-trap. Why do I enter? The other day someone else was thinking with my brain and talking with my mouth. This evening someone else is running with my legs."

But he sprinted mightily for the end of the dead lane. There was a broken gap in the brick wall through which a determined man might force himself, if his life depended on it. He came almost to the gap, and a Programmed Killer was forcing its own way back through that gap. And another followed him through.

They were stalking him from both ends of the alley. It was all sheer brick and stone walls, slimy and green with old rain and old age, and no man could climb them. And there was no door or opening of any sort in the short length of the alley.

No door? Are you sure? Thomas felt that he was a puppet played on strings. He also felt that it might be the cleanest thing to let the Killers have him there. Someone had drawn him into this sack. Had he taken the other turning he'd have had a live chance of escaping the Killers. He'd escaped them before. But had he been drawn here to his death, or to something dirtier? ,

For there was a door there. It hadn't been there before, and it shouldn't be there now.

"What are the odds?" Thomas asked himself loudly. He surged through the door (snakes crawling back into his mind), knowing that he went from the

world into a dream, knowing that he went from life to something queerer even . than death. He slammed the door heavily and bolted it behind him.

And he stood in total darkness.

"Sit at the table with us," said a voice, a wrong-side voice, either inside Thomas' head or without. "Now we talk."

"Set a light," Thomas said. "It's blind dark."

"We don't need a light," the voice said. "Stop fighting the . things in your head! They can see for you. Is it not so? Do you not see now, and not by light?"

Thomas saw now, and not by light: He looked at Things .. through somebody else's eyes, perhaps through the eyes of 1 the Things. He was seeing in total darkness through the eyes of the eerie snakes in his head, and he was looking at Things that he would rather not have seen.

There were nine of the Things there. Thomas had learned to think of them as Things in his last defiant surge back to reason. What were they?

What was their form?

Men. Men seen from the other side. From the back side? Yes, in the sense that a tapestry may be seen from its back side, the same picture but rough and deformed. These things were the deformation of mankind.

Nine of the things there, and they were drawn up m groups of three around a large conference table. Like men, but with all the wrong things emphasized-ears, man ears, and yet somehow swinish; noses that were snouts, and yet not large, not malformed, simply wrongly emphasized; eyes that were made like human eyes, and yet these were not humans looking out of them.

They were not men, though Thomas was sure that he had known at least one of them as a man. They were Programmed Persons all-Things.

"Good evening, gentle contrivances," Thomas said as he took a bold seat at the head of the table. It was not where they had motioned him to sit.

"Not there!" sharply cried one of those that Thomas had known as a man. "That is reserved for the Holy Ouden."

"I sit herel" And Thomas sat. "Ah, I once told the Paul that I would have to discover for myself the name of the real King of Astrobe. It is the Ouden Himself! Let Old Nothingness find his own seat. I do not sit below the salt for any tin-horn things. Are the stilted killers outside belonging to your party?

Do you control them? Was it you who drew me into this blind sack?"

"Of course," said one of them, speaking with a voice too smooth to be human. "I am Boggle, and these other two who form a creative trinity with me are Skybol and Swampers. Our specialty is retrogression."

"Jackals you be," said Thomas, and the three were very like jackals. The jackal in human form may be told by the lay of the hair and the set of the ears. Yet they were of good human appearance, though more alienated from the human than even the real jackal animal.

Three snakes stirred in Thomas' brain. The snakes were in accord with these three Things. They must have been their extensions.

"Retrogression, then," Thomas said. "Go find your dens and runs in another head."

"I am Northprophet," said the leader of the second group. "My fellows here are Knobnoster and Beebonnet, and our specialty is rechabitism."

"Dogs you be," Thomas swore, and the three had all a touch of the dog in them. It was most weird that these creatures should seem on three levels, the human, the animal, and the machine. Then Thomas knew there was still another level in them all-the ghost.

Ah, this North prophet had himself once been candidate for president of Astrobe. He had passed as a man; and then there had come the moment when he could not quite pass. It had made more of a difference then. The Programmed had built him especially for the job of World President. He was deftly contrived. He would have made the perfect World President, from the Programmed view.

Three more snakes stirred in Thomas' brain, one of them a great one.

This Northprophet was great among his kind.

"Rattle along Things," Thomas said sharply. "My time is limited. So is my life. And I do not enjoy the company overmuch."

"I am Pottscamp," said the leader of the third group. And of course it was the old acquaintance whom Thomas had known as a man, the fourth member of the Big Three. But he looked greatly different now, as things do look different in a nightmare. And Thomas was forced to think of him differently, now that he was no longer a friend, now that he was a Programmed and not a human, now that he was known to have a Brain Snake as a familiar and an extension of himself.

"My companions here are Holygee and Gandy," Pottscamp said, "and our specialty is extrapolation."

"Wilderness Wolves you be," Thomas said. "You howl higher than the ear on a bleaker moor than any on this world. All right, the nine of you, extrapolate, damn itl Retrogress. Rechabitizel Nine of you, and are your extensions not the nine snakes nesting in my mind?"

"Of course, Thomas," said Pottscamp. "You are our assignment. No other man ever rated so many important, ah, snakes. This is the talk that I promised you, Thomas. I told you that I held the Big Three Ones in the middle of my maw. They argue which of them are the puppets and which the puppeteer, but I am the theater in which their little show is played out.

And I promised that you would be shown the back of the tapestry. Now it is that we will show you that picture of the reverse side, of the true side. It is a

more meaningful world than the one you are accustomed to."

"Odd design, the back of that tapestry," Thomas said. "Full of snakes, is it not?"

"Not at all, Thomas. From the true side they are not snakes but royal curiles twisted in mystic curves. Thomas, it is only for our old companionship that you are here at all. And I will say that yours is one of the most interesting minds I ever nested in. The others wanted to kill you offhand and to substitute a replica of you that would be of our kind."

"I don't come through on Replica, Pottscamp. I'm invisible there."

"The replica we'd make of you would come through. We'd make it better and more like you than you are yourself. And it would behave as you have behaved, but without these moments of rebellion."

"On with it, Pottscampl Show me the backward-picture, since I am here in a trap and must listen. You extrapolate, do you? Do it, then."

"It is that ourselves are the extrapolation of mankind," Northprophet cut in. He seemed to outrank Pottscamp himself in this hierarchy. "We will tell you the facts, Thomas, since you will not be able to stand against them. We confess that we have a little bit of the show-boat attitude programmed into us, and we love to gloat. You will not be able to do anything about what we tell you here. But, conversely, we are not able to extinguish you yet. That is really why we have not done it. We know that you have a warded life and that it is impossible to kill you till your time shall come. However, we could easily hide you and substitute for you. And it would be possible to cut you up terribly, to come very near to killing you. We could turn you into no more than a vegetable that suffers, but you will not die till you are so fated."

"Are the Programmed as foolish as humans, to believe in Fate?"

Thomas asked. This seeing without light through other eyes was a little bit like seeing under water, seeing under something much deeper. One saw in both surface and depth. One saw, but did not comprehend, the interior mechanism as well as the surface weirdness of these entities, saw the

jumbled essence that made one call Northprophet howling dog and Pottscamp Wilderness Wolf. There were animal-like ghosts inside them, and seeing with extensions of their own eyes one saw this ghostliness. "I thought you Programmed were merely interesting toys. Now I find that you are deformed toys, but Things still. Get back in your boxes, you Jack-Jumps!"

"Thomas, we've taken over the box," said Pottscamp. "The box is Astrobe. We take over all the boxes. Now we call it! You jump! You are the toys now, and we play with you till we throw you away."

"Who are you, clockwork things that grow too grand?"

"Who are we, and how did we begin, Thomas? The texts that you yourself are permitted to study are only the shadow of the story. A century ago certain men of science made the first of us as a means of studying themselves. They wished to see if they could make men better than men were matte naturally. We turn aside for a moment in the explanation, Thomas. Hear one thing, and then forget it:

"Yoùbelieve' a little bit at times, Thomas; and with your tatters of faith you guess a little who we are. According to your ancient belief we are Devils. What we call ourselves is another thing, but we are older than our own manufacture and older than our programming. These are houses, and well-made ones, that we found swept and garnished; and we moved into them. This particular bit of information, Thomas, is that part which you will forget most quickly and most thoroughly. See, you have forgotten it already:"

Pottscamp had seemed to stutter in the inside-the-maw no-light that illumined all things there, and then he went on:

"They wished to see if they could make men better than men were made naturally. They should never have taken that cover off that box. You yourself have called us a boys' dream and you have professed great wonder about us. We will not now talk about para-collodial chemistry and zygote electronics, nor about gell-cells and flux-fix. It isn't my field, and you yourself are a thousand years behind on science. It is seldom mentioned, however, what raw material was used for the first of us, what was the

matrix in which the devices and controls were imbedded. It was a dozen young and unintelligent human criminals. What minds they had were direct and uncomplicated. There was in the selected twelve young men an absence of what is called emotion, of what is called indecision, an absence of such human aberrations as remorse and conscience. They were a carefully selected collection of walking corpses, large blank pages on which could be printed anything whatsoever. These men of science printed themselves, ourselves, upon them.

"But these men of science who contrived us were also a carefully selected dozen, selected by themselves. They also were comparatively young, but intelligent, human criminals. `Criminal' for human is Right for us, of course. It was the morality business that had most crippled mankind and held it back, and this dozen scientists knew it. Themselves were of such an elite, so hard to come by, so difficult to find even twelve on a populated world, that they decided to produce themselves artificially and with every improvement built in. These improvements they could put into a device laid out before them, but could less easily put into themselves."

"It couldn't have happened quite like that," Thomas protested. "You're live things, however warped and artificial. There is something you're not telling me, something that you are hiding with words."

"Be patient, good Thomas, and listen," said Pottscamp, the Wilderness Wolf in the shape of a man. "They made us into complex electronic and chemical-coded gadgets, able to reproduce ourselves like humans, and yet with less than ten percent of our tissue of human origin after we were perfected. We have, you see, spare brains and information nexuses stowed all over us. We can rearrange ourselves quickly and with no loss of function into other forms than that which we usually use to pass as humans. We can also send out extensions of ourselves, flyers, the snakes in your brain, Thomas. We can do everything that man can do, and very much besides.

So there is duplication here. Man is obsoleted. Who needs him? Who wants him?

"Are we really men? It is sometimes asked. No. We are not. Have we that special something that distinguishes men from animals and from machines?

No, we have not. And man has it not either. That special something is imaginary.

"Suffice it to say that those' single-minded men who invented us did break down the barrier between living and nonliving matter. And they discovered that the living was the illusion. Well then, they created us as dead men, and dead men we be. We are dead, and all is dead. But we believe that we are complete. We feel that there is no dimension beyond ourselves. In our beginning man made us. Then we made ourselves, a little more efficiently than man could do it. We reproduce almost in your own manner. We even cross with humans, with some curious results. We have become man. We have replaced man. Soon man will be nothing."

"If what you say is true, old wolf-ghost Pottscamp, and I feel that it isn't completely true, then how do you differ from mankind?" Thomas wanted to know. "How will it matter if mankind is destroyed?"

"It surely will not matter to us, Thomas," old wolf-ghost Pottscamp said.

"We'd have completed it long ago, but details take time and obstructions aren't cleared in a year. It does not matter to the mainstreams of mankind.

Those of the mainstreams, the typical man of Astrobe today, would as soon be phased out as not. It makes a difference only to the divergent people, the atypical and negligible ones.

"But I didn't mean that we were identical to men. We aren't. There is a great difference. You learned that difference, though you cannot give a name to it, talking to the divergents of Cathead. The lungers, the hard-heads, know us every time. We cannot pass with them for men, not even for a minute. There are differences between ourselves and men; we will root them out of men, or we will root out men. One of the things is consciousness. Men claim to have it. We do not have it."

"You are not conscious?" Thomas gasped. "That is the most amazing thing I have ever heard. You walk and talk and argue and kill and subvert and lay out plans over the centuries, and you say that you are not conscious?"

"Of course we aren't, Thomas. We are machines. How would we be conscious? But we believe that men are not conscious either, that there is no such thing as consciousness. It is an illusion in counting, a feeling that one is two. It is a word without real meaning."

"But if we are not conscious, then all is in vain," said Thomas. "To what purpose then is life?"

"To no purpose," Boggle cut in. "That is why we are doing away with it."

"What? All life? Yours and ours? That is horrifying!" Thomas exclaimed.

"Yes, all life, yours and ours," Boggle said. "Who needs it? Who wants it?

Who thought it up in the first place? It is a disturbance of the ultimate thing and it cannot be tolerated much longer. We have, and men have, an appetite for life. Men programmed it into us, but we are now programming it out of ourselves. The growing generation of ourselves is to be the final generation. They will remain only long enough to oversee the obliteration of mankind. Then they will extinguish themselves. We do not know how men came to have such a strange appetite. We do not know how men themselves, or anything whatsoever, came to be. But it was a bad idea from the beginning. As soon as we here present have lived our lives to some fullness and have satisfied our curiosities (curiosity is programmed into us, but it is not programmed into our final generation) then we will phase out these appetites in ourselves. We will phase our reproduction also; in fact, we have recently done that for ourselves. We will terminate it all. We will close down the worlds and make an end of life. It will be nothing, nothing, nothing, forever, for ever, for never, for never. And when all has ceased to be, it will also happen that nothing has ever been. We will pull the hole in after us. We will put out the stars, one by one and billion by billion. What is not known to be is not. And what is not has never been.

Peace in annihilation, good Thomas."

"Peace in annihilation, good Boggle, and may great Ouden be praised for never and never," Thomas croaked. "Damn you all!" he exploded. "I didn't

say thatl Somebody else said it out of my mouth. What snake talks in my head?"

"Oh, that was myself," said Skybol. "We also have our humor."

"Good Thomas," said Swampers, one of the minor jackal ghosts. "The spirit came down once on water and clay. Could it not come down on gell-cells and flux-fix?"

"What means the quiet jackal by that blurting out?" Thomas asked them all. "It means nothing to me."

"If it means nothing to you, then it means nothing at all," Northprophet said.

"So, it has come to this," Thomas said sadly. "And only the men who set up monstrous Cathead knew that something was wrong. The run of men had become so empty and mechanical and effete that they could not tell themselves from you. Only the hard-heads with the transcendent smell on them recognized the deformity. They knew that you were not men. They knew that most men were not men. They refused the terminal golden pap.

They challenged the economic bribery and the surrogate life. They wanted life itself, however mean. They set up their own complex with every sanction against them. They built extreme suffering into it, as a man will smash his hand against a post in pain to prove that he is awake. They undercut and undersold the machine-mind-men with their own lungs' blood.

Worse than any death is never having lived. Worst of all is never having lived in life. I'd rather be a soul in Hell than nothing at all."

"Even that choice will be denied you," said Holygee. "We will extinguish Hell also, if it has any existence. All must go. And when it is, all finished, we also will never have been."

"If you be not, why do you mind that others be?" Thomas asked.

"It displeased Ouden that any be," Holygee said. "He had a jealous maw."

"Good Thomas," said Gandy, one of the minor Wilderness Wolf-ghosts,

"there is an old human phrase, `The Left Han of God.' Might it not come down on left-handed entities such as ourselves?"

"Mock me if you will," Thomas said angrily, "but mock: not the poor people who still believe. Or do I get your meaning?"

"If it means nothing to you, Thomas, then it means nothing at all,"

Pottscamp said.

"And now what will you do, Thomas?" Northprophet asked him. "Will you refuse the golden dole and go cough up your lungs with the poor men of Cathead and the Barrio? You know, it is we who have devised that their power should be so grinding. We frustrate them in every detail. They had some workable ideas, but we do not let them work. Will you go with them?

Thomas, you love your comforts too much for that. Where can you turn with any hope? `Hope,' by the way, is one of those concepts which we have already rooted out of most men. It was never in ourselves. In what can you hope, Thomas?"

"I will still turn with some slight hope to the three cryptic men who brought me here," Thomas said.

"You hope too high," Northprophet told him. "One of them is a turgid man of no consequence, and we use him for a front. The second of them is an artificial man of our own sort."

"Proctor?"

"Yes, he's a programmed person. He's programmed to be lucky, Thomas. And Thomas, we'll make you a fair offer: we'll do the same thing for you. We'll give you the luckiest life alive. You can name your own details, but you must take our offer now. We won't dangle it forever."

"No, I'll continue with my unluck," Thomas said.

"So much for that," said Pottscamp. "And now a few instructions, Thomas. You will be compelled to obey them by the snakes in your head, ourselves.

You will not destroy the Cathead thing. We enjoy the suffering of them there, and we fear the reaction if it is destroyed before things are ripe.

In our own time, in our own very near time, we will terminate Cathead and Golden Astrobe and all."

"What of the High Vision, the Astrobe Dream that you put into the tall heads of the people?" Thomas asked.

"Oh, the vision is valid," Pottscamp said. "It is the whole thing. It slipped in on you and you made love to it several times. You are not in all ways different from the ninety percent of the men. The Vision is the Golden Premise of Nothing Beyond; and the Conclusion is Holy Ouden, Nothing Here Either, Nothing Ever."

"Of the men who sent for me there is still the third man, Foreman,"

Thomas said.

"Yes, he still. tilts with us," Northprophet admitted. "He was one of the first to understand the situation and he will be one of the last to give up on it.

That man has given us more trouble than any other and he acts as though he still has one trick to play. We believe it concerns you.

"But you cannot oppose us, Thomas. We envelop you. No body supports you more strongly than we do; not the Third Compromise Party, not the Kiss of Deaths, not the Hatrack, not Demos. It is ourselves working through all the parties, who puts you over. Who but us has raked the, pebbles from: your path and strewn flowers before your feet? Who but ourselves have won it for you, influencing so many minds directly and indirectly? Snakes in your head! You know,; how we do itl We beat the drum for you day and night. a You are our patsy. You can't escape us. It would not even, do you any good to disappear, supposing that you could,'

hide from us. We could make another Thomas More in hour, and nobody would know the difference."

"A man named Foreman would know the difference," Thomas maintained. "A child-brat would know, and men:3 named Copperhead and Battersea and Rimrock and Shanty.Paul would know, and the creature Maxwell who is between bodies. The boy Adam would know and he would not die for, a surrogate. A woman who touched me in a muddy lane' would know the difference. No, I'll have nowt to do with you or your thing. Snakes in my brain and all, I'll fight me a battle yet"

"No, no, you will forget all of it, Thomas," said Swampers. "The specialty of our group is retrogression, and we will: retrogress you. When you walk out of that door you will for-: get it all. We will sing those things to sleep in you, all the. things that you have heard here this evening. You will not: even remember this meeting. You forget that we are the singing snakes in your head. You forget it all now."

"I'll not forget!" Thomas insisted. "I'll remember it all and act upon it." He started to rise, and he fell in rising. He was into a daze. Then they sealed .

it all into him with searing laughter so that his mind shrank and closed.

Boggle, Skybol, and Swampers! Jackal's laughter, barking derisive laughter. Tearing, wounding laughter. Northprophet,; Knobnoster, Beebonnetl Howling-dog laughter, laughter that will make a man lie low in his skin and hide. Pottscamp"

Holygee, and Gandyl Wilderness-Wolf laughter, ghost laughter.

Laughter that opens the bleeding inside.

This was insane stuff. Thomas bolted out of the door, and then turned in amazement trying to remember where he had been and what he had done.

Where had he just come from? There was no door or opening in the alley-lane at all, only blank-faced building. But he was bitter with anger and shame. He had just been deeply humiliated, and his mind was in a blank turmoil.

Thomas struggled for remembrance for what seemed hours, but was actually less than a minute. Two men were approaching, and he was in no condition to meet anyone. They were the important men Northprophet and Pottscamp, but what was the matter with them? Their faces were contorted into comic-tragic torture lines. They seemed almost to sob, and they moved clumsily. They came up to him and touched him.

"Thomas," they said. "We be souls in agony. What must we do to be saved?"

Thomas stared at them and could not fathom the clowns at all.

"Your unfunny irony is too much for me this day," he said. "Be gone!"

11. NINE DAY KING

IT WAS the beginning of summer of the year of Astrobe 535. On Old Earth it was also the year 535 A.S. (anno scientiae, in the year of science). By old count on Earth it was the year 2535. It was neat to keep this even two thousand year interval.

To accomplish it, there had to be a "Free Year" on Astrobe every twenty-nine years, as the Astrobe years are a little shorter than Earth years.

It should have been the year of Astrobe 553, but it was counted as the year of Astrobe 535, "Free Years" not being summed in the total. It worked pretty, well.

Thomas More took office as World President on June of the year of Astrobe 535.

Thomas loved the job. He had a feeling for power. Not an unusually vain man, he still believed that he came near the old idea of the philosopher king. Aye, he had .been an amateur philosoph for years, and now he was king indeed, for the president of Astrobe was popularly called king, especially in Cathead. Thomas had a certain genius for clear reasoningand for simplifying the tangled. He analyzed, and he went quickly to the core of things; and here he had a freedom for his talents that he had never had

before. When he had. been chancellor of England there had always been the King, a rather difficult man of solid legal standing above him. Now there was only Kingmaker, a less difficult man, of no. legal standing at all.

Thomas was not compelled to take Kingmaker's advice, but he always listened to it with happy ears.

"Now that your mistress and your animal have both left you, you should obtain another of each," Kingmaker said. "You cannot let down on your public image, now that you are on top."

"I never had one of either, as I've told you before," Thomassaid easily.

"The brat says that she will come back in time to die for me, and she indicates that that will be soon. And Rimrock the ansel is often in my mind- I mean that literally; ; he is eutheopathic, you know. But he dislikes what he finds in my mind now, he says. He swears that the diet there is . too rich for him, though he loved to feast on sea-snakes when he was a youngling in the ocean depths. He often talks in riddles like that. He was always a great one for warning me of the Programmed Killers, though. It was by his warnings, I now know, that I was able to escape them so many times. .

They do not try openly to kill me now. They still follow, and they grin at me with great grins. They make a sign, the edge of the hand to the nape of the neck. I am told by one who understands them better that this means `The time is coming soon: "

"It is smooth, too smooth, like the lull before a storm,"

Kingmaker said. "It is as if our world were holding its breath while waiting for something to happen."

"Let it hold it till it turns blue, Kingmaker; that indicates an early harvest.

I am in no rush; I am in no rush about anything. It will go well. Things right themselves and fall into proper place even as I look at them. Was I not told that I would live the luckiest life alive?"

"I don't know. Who told you that, Thomas?"

"I don't rightly recall, but it seems as if I have it as a promise. If I do not upset the cart, if I do not bust the jug, if I do not do some low and unreasonable thing, then everything will go lucky for me. There's a hook in it, I believe, and I don't remember whether I swallowed the bait or not. But it was offered to me, and I certainly feel lucky now."

"Cathead is strangely quiet, Thomas. She is usually quite noisy and angry in times of change of administration. Do you believe this quiet presages a surrender, a mass exodus of Cathead men back to the Golden Life?"

"No, I do not. How could they surrender? The Cathead divergents have not had the benefits of being programmed for surrender. Besides, they enjoy seeing them suffer."

"Who does? I don't enjoy seeing them suffer."

"Neither do I. That last phrase I said, Kingmaker, I didn't say it.

Somebody else said it out of my mouth. Oh, don't be alarmed for me. I'm sane and sound. It is only a little thing that sometimes happens when I'm not paying attention to what I'm saying. But I'm not going to worry about the Cathead thing at all."

"But it is the greatest worry of us rulers of Astrobe, Thomas. It is the one thing that spoils the serenity of our world. And you did make certain campaign promises that you would settle the Cathead affair, directly, and severely if need be."

"I'll find a smooth way of breaking those promises, Kingmaker. You treat me as an amateur at this game, but I'm not. I'll settle the Cathead affair by considering it already settled. It is quiet. And you want it noisy again? It's as though I had been told by a vast interior voice not to worry about the Cathead thing. It's as though I had been told not to worry about anything whatsoever.

"The most successful Astrobe administration to date was a perpetual contrived calm before, a storm that never came. I believe that I can manage the same thing here."

"That is not quite what I had in mind for your role," Kingmaker said, "but we will see how it works."

It was all clear sailing over an ocean of good-feeling and clich6. There was no cloud in the sky now shadow over the grian-sun.

"We are not even sure that there is a sky, that there is a sun,"

Kingmaker said. "But it doesn't matter to the people, and it doesn't matter to me. Who looks up any more?"

"The sun is a hole and not a body," Thomas said. "It is not a the symbol of round fullness but of binning emptiness of Ouden. No, no! I didn't say that. Another said it with my mouth."

The vote for Thomas had been overwhelming. His friends had been solidly for him, and his real enemies had enveloped him with their extravagant support. The sensing machines gave him one of the clearest victories ever.

Even the hard-heads from Cathead and the Barrio did not disgrace this inauguration, as they had disgraced most of them for the last twenty years.

They were silent, and with g a queer look on their millions of faces. The poor lungers, the . hard men of Cathead looked at each other and looked at _ their leaders. Their leaders looked at the ground as if they " would find the answer in the dusty lanes or the broken pave- ; ments.

"We will not march now. In nine days we will march," said Battersea, one of the leaders of Cathead. The other leaders and the great mass of poor people seemed to agree.

And Thomas was calm and confident in his mind. It was a most peculiar calm that obtained there. "It is an enforced calm," he said to himself, "and not of my making. Could I break the calm, I'd be in a turmoil over it."

Some little time past, in the final days of the campaign, Thomas had had a walking evening nightmare. It had been blotted from his mind, but there was a scrap of it unburied, and sometimes he could catch hold of that scrap and almost drag the nightmare back onto the scene. He came very near to recreating it a half dozen times. But the recreation was obstructed and distorted. It slipped, it twisted, it changed form, it faded. There were things in his mind that were shoving it out.

It had been a nightmare about those toy jump-jacks, the programmed mechanical men. In the nightmare these Programmed persons were really running the worlds; and the human persons themselves had become so programmed and mechanical that it made no difference. But there was more to it than that. It involved the extinguishing of the worlds, the blotting out of all past time, so that nothing had ever been, so that nothing was now, so that nothing ever could be. And then it didn't involve any such things. It was not the worlds that never happened; it was the nightmare that never happened.

It dropped out of his mind again. What had it been about? Thomas had a terrible headache from this, and near prostration of body. Then he took simple medication for it all, and the sickness faded, and so did the nightmare and the memory of it.

The job of World President was amazingly easy. Bills were drawn up, agreed on and submitted by the Lawmasters, the one hundred and one great minds (selected for their brilliant legal genius by the selecting machines) that did these things so expertly on Astrobe. There was, of course, a great volume of bills presented to the new president, for it was always the custom to throw them at him in great bunches initially. But they were easily handled.

Every bill could be analyzed by independent machine, interpreted and broken down, and the correct decision on it indicated automatically.

Sometimes it seemed to Thomas that the decisions were indicated automatically to him in an interior manner also. And the decisions from both sources were always the same: Do pass. How can you go wrong when the answer is always yes?

There was an additional reason for voting yes. A president of Astrobe who three times vetoed any proposal adopted by the Lawmasters was sentenced to death, no matter what form that proposal had been presented under.

Did that make the World President a balloon-head? no means. His real job was to initiate the machinations that; led to the bills to consult and advise, to maintain and create; a concensus. The business of approving the finished bills was: a holdover from earlier times. Approval was supposed to be, automatic.

The bills themselves, many of them would have baffled' a Whitechapel lawyer.

Well, Thomas had been a Whitechapel lawyer in basic life. He had a go at a few of the bills. He knew all about incongruous riders on bills, possibly more than analyzing machines themselves knew. He had himself vented trick riders on bills. He read the bills minutely, to the disgust of his associates. But he passed many of the bills"!, that he really did not wish to pass.

"It becomes odder and odder," he said. "Someone else thinking with my mind, someone else is talking- with my voice, and now someone else is signing bills with my hand."

He passed the Ninth Standardization Act with its curious, riders. It sought to complete the standardization of the mind, as well as of the objects of the mind. Somebody was building higher and higher on this contrived foundation. "What curious cat-castles they do build!" he said. He passed it: through, though wondering just what someone was up to, wondering also why he passed it at all.

He drew the teeth from a few other bills before sending; them through.

Somehow the teeth grew back into them by, various enabling acts. He pulled fang after fang from the Compulsory Benignity Bill. That one went even beyond the s' Open Mind Act. "This is not the face of Benignity as it,"

he said.

The fangs grew back, tacked slyly onto other bills. It grew distasteful as the outlines of the building meant to be raised on this benignant foundation grew clearer.

Thomas wished that he could remember more of his waking nightmare of some time before.

And now there was ,a slim bill among many, but there sounded a warning in his mind about it. Possibly it was a warning from Rimrock the ansel. It was of the old The Killers are upon yaul variety, but it was not in words.

Thomas had just been very clever in spotting weird things in a series of bills and in taking exception to them. He had showboated his expertise and was quite proud of himself. But he wanted a rest from it now. He wanted these last bills for the day to slide through easily; and he was somewhat irritated by the warnings in his head.

So he barely spotted the joker in the Earth Severance Act; it was in a footnote to a footnote, as it were. But when he spotted it, he shook as though he had picked up a snake, thinking it to be a stick (his own phrase): It was a simple clause under the section Remnants. Well, it did outlaw all remnants of a thing that had once seemed important, so perhaps it belonged in the section Remnants, except that it had nothing to do with the Earth Severance Act. Thomas didn't see much wrong with the phrase or proposition, except that it was completely out of place and a little unsavory in its arrogance. It wasn't that he opposed the idea; it was just the utter presumption of the Lawmasters, or whoever, in setting it in here in a bill where it did not belong and in trying to slide it past him.

"They should call it thèBan the Beyond Act," he said. Its very plausibility went against it. Why bother to enact such a thing? It wasn't needed. There was no reason at all for it. But somebody had gone to the trouble of trying to slip it past him.

"Aye, they'd forbid the thing even to cast a shadow any longer," he said.

"Why should they so fear a shadow? The thing itself's about dead. Give it its last minute. Why so avid to murder it, when already the heartbeat has

nearly stopped?"

He cut the clause out of the bill. He felt apprehensive when he had done it. He had been cutting bigger things out of bigger bills all day, much of it for devilment, most of it out of curiosity, to see just what they would ride back in on the next day. He hadn't been apprehensive about cutting up the bigger bills. He was worried because things were losing their proportion for him. He closed up shop for the day.

The next morning it was back as a rider to the Botch Bill, the first bill of the day. Somebody had been busy during the night finding a way to insert this into a bill that had no possible connection with it, a bill he had already scanned and which had been set over for only one minor clarification.

Thomas surely wouldn't have spotted it in the Botch Bill if it hadn't been for a warning in his mind, an old Rimrock-like sort of warning,: The Killers are upon you.

Thomas heard a distant ticking in his mind as though time were running out on him. This odd little recommendation was important to someone, and it began to have a gamier smell than mouse or mole could give.

He angrily vetoed the entire Botch Bill. There was something final about his act. He had felt himself the master. Now he felt himself out of his depth, ,and for one small phrase of indifferent meaning and no importance at all. He was whiting in the hands of the Programming Machines and the Programmed People. But he was president.

He closed up shop for that day. It was not yet eight o'clock in the morning. He hadn't been in the suite for ten minutes.

"A King should not work all day like .a knave. In particular, a King should not work on an inauspicious day."

Kingmaker talked to Thomas privately about it that evening. Thomas would much rather have talked to Fabian Foreman about it, but Foreman hadn't given the sign that he wanted to talk now, and in fact had dodged out of it the one time Thomas had approached him.

"Gallows-time will be time enough to talk," he'd said, and he had winked at Thomas without humor. But there had been a thing deep in Foreman's eyes, and another thing deeper, and a third thing deeper still.

So it must be a lecture from Kingmaker.

"It is all a question of neatness," Cosmos Kingmaker said. "The Good Life cannot have any awkward element in it. There is really but one awkward element surviving (barely surviving), and it is that which we are cutting out. The Dream of Astrobe is Finalized Humanity. If anywhere there is a belief in a spook beyond, then the Dream will fail."

"Finalized Humanity is a tricky phrase, Cosmos. It has two meanings. It can mean perfected humanity. Or it can mean terminated humanity,"

"No, it has only one meaning, Thomas. They are the two sides of the same thing. We, the People of the Dream, have raised ourselves from single-celled creatures, and from things still lower than the single cells. The Cosmic Thing is us. We are the Blessed of the ancients; we are the Saints.

The Hereafter is here now, and we are in the middle of it. Don't foul the nest, Thomas, don't foul the nest."

"There is an ancient allegory about mad creatures who broke out of our state of perfection, believing that there was something beyond. They fell forever into the void. Let not that happen to us!"

"I just had a black notion that the tags were mixed and that Golden Astrobe was the void," Thomas said.

"Well, forget your black notions. And now we get politic about this. I myself do not see why it is important whether a dying thing live a little longer or die now. But the Programmed Persons among us say that it is important to them."

"Aye, they have a timetable on the phasing of all things out, and it will not do for them to run behind. Forgive me, Kingmaker; that was another black notion of mine. I hardly know what I say."

"If it is important to the Programmed Persons, but unimportant to us, then let us give in to them. They have given in to us so many times."

"Have they honestly?" mused Thomas. "I have a feeling . . . I have a feeling that I'm in the middle of a fight. But it seems so small a thing to fight over that I'm full of doubt. But is it really so small a thing? It's over the mixing of the tags again, you know. It is for me to decide whether the tags on Èverything' and on `Nothing' have been swapped, and whether I should forbid that they ever be righted."

"No tags have been exchanged, Thomas. Everything is properly labeled on a proper world. If we do this thing, Old Earth will follow us; she follows us in everything now. So if we say that it is over with, then it is over with forever.

"And there is this, Thomas-you will sign the proposition tomorrow, or you will die the following day. There is a limit to what a World President can obstruct. A responsible bill or clause, passed three times by the Lawmasters, and vetoed three times by the president, means death for that president. Two vetoes is sometimes a grand or defiant gesture, though rather flamboyant, I think. Three vetoes is unheard of. Will you pass it?"

"What angered me was attempts to slip it through blind riders to common bills."

"It will be presented tomorrow as a bill of its own, and uncompromised.

Will you sign it?"

"If it had been so presented the first time, I'd have signed it without question."

"Yes, but will you sign it tomorrow?"

"I don't know, Kingmaker. I stood, not long ago, on the I top of Electric Mountain. I stood there in the middle of a thunder storm more intense than any I had thought possible.I traveled across a feral strip, and discovered that there are, still a few Feral People. I saw creatures that made me believe that

there really was, or had been, a Devil. I met a young; man who was a One Day Emperor. I believe now that we' may have a Nine Day King."

"What are you talking about, Thomas? What of it? has any of that to do with this matter?"

"I don't know. It seems that it should have something to do with it.

Remembering the High Thunder should make a difference in something."

The Big Ones had Thomas up on the carpet the next morning: Kingmaker, Proctor, Foreman, Chezem, Pottseamp, Wot-tle, Northprophet.

But were not both Pottscamp and out of .a forgotten nightmare? Well, can you afford to affront a man just because you have dreamed of him in an unfavorable light? What nightmare, anyhow?

"You'll do one of two things, Thomas," Proctor told him: evenly. "You'll sign the bill. Or you'll die. You don't seem to want to do the first. And I don't think you like the second either."

"Thomas, you have twice vetoed an innocuous item. Why?" Pottscamp asked.

There was something strange about Pottscamp that Thomas! could not analyze. He knew the man well; and now he has the feeling that he hardly knew him at all.

"Spanish Devils! I don't know why!" Thomas exploded. "I thought it innocuous also; I only resented the attempt to slip it by me in the dark. But I see now that it cannot be innocuous, if it was put in by stealth twice, and if you are all so excited over its veto. There's an old man dying last night and this morning, and perhaps he is already dead. So, let him die, and perhaps the thing has finally died with him. But you have no call to murder a thing on its death bed. Whether there be Things Beyond I do not know. Ye'd forbid the mind to consider them. I forbid the forbidding."

"Thomas, the Metropolitan of Astrobe did die during the night,"

Kingmaker said. "He died with all his followers around him-four of. them.

We murder nothing here which is living."

"Thomas, trust us," said Proctor. "At least trust Pottscamp here.

Everybody on Astrobe trusts Pottscamp."

"The man whose personal dishonesty nobody doubts," Thomas sneered.

Now why was he being so hard on so good a man as Pottscamp?

"Thomas, there isn't one man in ten million on Astrobe or Earth who still believes," said Kingmaker. "And last evening you told me that you yourself were no longer a believer."

"That was last evening, Cosmos. In the mornings I sometimes believe a little."

"It damages our relations with the Programmed to allow Beyond things to be believed in, even if only by one person," Proctor said. "They want all this broken as a symbol. They insist upon it. This is one harmless point on which we can give ground. Now, here, it's all in a bill by itself. Sign it!"

"Nine snakes in my head! I won't!" Thomas shouted. "It is not just four madmen in Cathead you'd be outlawing. I found about it only by accident, but there is a synagogue on Astrobe yet. It has between fifty and sixty members. There's a mosque on Astrobe with thirteen members. There are several dozen of the old sects remaining, several of them with near a dozen members. There's the green-robed monks of Saint Klingensmith still working in the feral strips. These are all good people, even if they are believers in outmoded things, and I see no reason to sentence them to death."

"They are hundreds only, or less, out of billions. We break it," said Northprophet.

"Do you feel that way, Kingmaker?" Thomas asked.

"Absolutely," said regal Kingmaker. "I don't believe any` diversity should be allowed, not even over such a minor.. aberration as this."

"Chezem, Pottscamp, Proctor, Wottle, Northprophet, do you all feel that way?"

They all felt that way, and they nodded gravely, grimly, almost in unison.

"Foreman, do you feel that way?" Thomas demanded.

Foreman didn't say anything. He had that deep look in: his eyes, and an ironic smile.

"Foreman, you're the historian," Thomas said. "It's tha same damned thing they killed me for the first time, isn't it?"

"Same damned thing, Thomas."

"Sign it," ordered Proctor.

"Oh all right. I'm tired of playing. I'll sign it," Thomas said.

"You know the penalty for not signing," Proctor "It's death, you know."

(Foreman had to hide his delight. It was so much better, that it was Proctor who had said that, who had blundered, who had pushed it too far.)

"For a World President to veto a bill three times means his death,"

Proctor said, pressing, blundering still deeper into it; and Thomas was turning angry red in the face. "That had to be enacted. We cannot have an obstructionist as World President. -Why do you hesitate now, when you were ready to sign a moment ago?"

"Aye, a man'd be a fool to lose his head twice over the same thing,"

Thomas mused, still looking more than half stubborn. "Of course I'll sign."

"He'd have to feel himself a little better than those around him to take up a challenge like that," Foreman put in hurriedly as Thomas had already touched magnetic stylus to the form. "He'd have to be a man of some pride."

"I am a man of some pride," Thomas said. "I do feel myself a little better than those around me, now that I really look at them."

"He'd have to be a man who couldn't be pushed and couldn't be scared,"

said Foreman.

"I say I'm such a man, even if it's a lie. But I scare a little," Thomas said.

"He'd have to be a man who'd stand his ground even if he were scared,"

Foreman needled. "He'd have to be quite a man to die for a point, even if he understood it only at the last minute, and then dimly. He'd have to be such a man-"

"Foreman, you fool, what are you up to?" Proctor demanded.

"Who pushed me into the corner the other time, Fabian?" Thomas asked softly. "Who required my head of me for his point?"

"If you're granted another life, Thomas, you try to figure it out. Will he be writ as friend or enemy of you, do you think? On which side did he seem?"

"Sign that bill," Proctor ordered. "We force you to."

"You will just play Johnny Hell forcing me to do anything," Thomas said.

He took the bill and scribbled in Latin "I forbid, "Veto" across the face of it.

They constituted themselves a hasty assembly then.

And they sentenced him to death.

12. THE ULTIMATE PEOPLE

THE EAGLES were gathering now. The phrase was Shanty's. Shanty had gone off and left his affairs, a monstrously big affair in monstrous Cathead, and had come to Cosmopolis. He looked like the eternal pilgrim with his hat on his head and his staff in his hand.

Battersea came from his waterfront hold. The scow-master from Cathead rubbed his hands together like a general before battle, which is what he was. They met in a back room of the shop of George the Syrian, who was in aromatics. We do not mean the Cathead shop; we mean George's shop right in the middle of Cosmopolis right off Centrality square.

Paul came there, using the little side door. He had never noticed the shop before and he had no idea why he entered, that door. He saw the others and wondered how they had' come together and how they had known where to come.. Then they were joined by Walter Copperhead the necromancer, and he ceased to wonder. Copperhead had himself been a prisoner the day before, under sentence of death on suspicion of starting a cult. He had come through walls to escape and to come to them.

"It isn't difficult," he said. "I believe that it has been insufficiently tried.

There are many who could go through walls if it ever occurred to them to try it. Someone is coming, and I have one of my premonitions."

Copperhead bolted the door. Then a shabby old lady came in through the wall.

"It's no test," Copperhead said. "She has only a contingent body."

"A little snuff for the love of God," the old lady said to George. "I have no money for it. I had a coin, but it melted in my hand."

"So will the snuff," said George the Syrian. "And when did the Programmed begin to use snuff?"

"I, sir?" the old lady asked. "Do I look like a Programmed?"

"No, but you are," George told her. "Your body is too contrived to be human."

"It's just an old body I found," she said. "It isn't my own. I don't really understand it at all. But, if I'm not a poor old lady, what am I?"

"Have you been my customer before?" George asked. "I seem to remember you."

He gave her snuff, poor-people snuff such as he put out in his shop in Cathead, not the aromatic dilettante snuff that he usually sold here.

"I don't remember you or your shop," the old lady said. "But I remember Paul a little bit. And now I remember you all, more and more. Yes, I have been of the company of all of you before, in one group or another."

"Maxwell, where in Hell or broken Astrobe did you get that body?"

Copperhead asked.

"Yes, Maxwell, that's the name I couldn't think of. Yes, I'm Maxwell, and I begin to recover my wits a little. I believe I found the old lady dead in an alley. It is an embarrassing situation I find myself in, gentlemen, but do not think any the less of me for it. Now, I will be with you till the end of the affair."

Somebody tried the barred door, then tried it harder. Then tried it most impatiently.

"This is the test," said Walter Copperhead. "We will see if she comes through the wall."

"Be you certain it's a she?" Shanty asked. "It's a strong hand there."

She didn't come through the wall, she came through the door, smashing and splintering it with a sudden shock of force. She was the most beautiful woman on Astrobe, and she came where she wished.

It had fallen to dusk outside. It would be inconvenient to leave the door standing shattered if they showed a light; and a high meeting cannot be held in the dark. There had been a hammering and ruckus outside for some time and they had hardly noticed it.

"Who's a-building, Evita?" Paul asked. "What are they making out there?

Did you notice what was going on before you broke in on us?"

"Oh, they're building the scaffold," she said. "Out of old ritual wood, it has to be. It's the pediment for the beheading tomorrow noon."

"I'll just borrow a bit of tools and boards," Shanty said. "They owe us that."

Evita had been battling principalities and powers for a long time, and it showed on her. And yet she didn't appear more than seventeen. She was indeed the most beautiful woman on Astrobe, with soft hair that seemed to have smoke on it, roiling black and now quieting to brown or gold. And were her eyes green or gray or blue?

"Will it be to the death?" she asked. "Tell us, Copperhead, will it be?"

"Oh, yes, it will be to his death."

"It will not be," Battersea swore. "Did you not know that I was a military general on frontier settlement reserve worlds before I joined the Cathead movement? I understand strategy and the quick strike. I have men, and the most sophisticated of weapons, no matter where I got them. We will have surprise working for us. It is to be at high noon tomorrow. We have it all times to the second. We snatch the Thomas. We set him up in a strong place between Wu Town and Cathead. He is King till he dies, and he will not die tomorrow. We have support in places you would never guess.

Millions are secretly sick of the golden Thing, and I mean here and in the other golden towns. We capture the whole machinery of administration. I am only the finger man, but we have men lined up who are capable of carrying it through. Cathead has not been the only opposition. There is a much larger thing just ready to smash through this thin crust. We'll combine

the several things and make us a decent world yet. Did you ever suppose that the shrill chorus represented the preponderance of opinion? This world has been led astray and put into bondage by a minority of a minority of a minority. We'll splinter that frail thing like the child-woman splintered the door, as beautifully and as powerfully."

"It may happen almost like that," said Copperhead. "Nevertheless, Thomas will lose his head tomorrow."

"He will not," said Battersea. "You're .a fool and no necromancer. Here comes the pup. How did he know to come? Be you an eagle, pup?"

It was Rimrock the ansel who sidled in.

"I be an eagle," he said. "I soar. It's the last night of the world, and we are not sure what the new world will be like. I've brought old rum, and brandy for those of a more barbarous taste."

Shanty had the door about fixed. He worked deftly and beautifully.

"It's better than new," he said. "It'd keep out a Programmed Patrol but it might not keep out an Evita. Strike a low light now, George. Conspirators must .always have a low light."

"The conspiring has long since been done," Battersea said. "I go now.

We march tomorrow, like a gaggle of poor lungers in from Cathead to goggle at the sight, but we will be the deftest commandos in the world. Can one of you get to the Thomas to tell him not to worry, that it is all taken care of?"

"Oh, I'll get to him," Evita said. "A wink to the Programmed guards, who have minds like adolescents, and I'm in. They think I'm his doxie, and they have a leering love of such things."

Battersea strode out and back towards Cathead. There was a shriller sound outside now that cut through the hammering. It was the honing of the big old ritual blade that would soon be set in place.

"I'd hoped that it would be a nice day for it," Shanty said, "but it might rain before morning. Did it rain the first time, does anybody know?"

"A little the night before and in the early morning," Copperhead said.

"But it cleared by the time of the beheading, and the sun was out."

The whine of steel on stone rose higher in the square outside. This was all by ancient formula, and the blade must be very sharp. The workers in the square had even lighted bonfires, though the night was warm. This is the only time that bonfires were ever lighted in golden Cosmopolis, on the eve of a beheading, and it had been twenty years since one. This was one of the last rituals.

The boy Adam came in, through the wall, but this also was no test. In many ways Adam was not real.

"My brother, you know these things also. Will it be his death?" Evita asked.

"Yes, it will be his death. And my final one," Adam said.

"Then Battersea is wrong and he won't be able to bring it off?"

"No, he isn't wrong. He will come and he will strike. And the new world may be made out of it. But many of the details will have to be changed."

"What is it in me that survives?" Maxwell asked. He had the shabby old lady's form and her voice, but they all knew him as Maxwell now. "I'm myself part programmed, as was Scrivener, in my origin. And this body I've picked up is a programmed body. It's badly made; it's hardly workable. I believe it was a hasty thing, used somehow as a disguise for a moment, and then cast off. How can they destroy me in one machine and I survive in another machine? They couldn't even destroy one personality, one that had no right to be in the first place. Well, what is it of Astrobe that will survive, them? You'll never know how I fought against oblivion. They, sure took my old apparatus apart in the potting shed."

After that they broke out the homesick old rum and held a . wake for Thomas More the man who would die the next day.. They became very droll and mellow over it. The worst of their black mood had gone by, and they believed that they would yet survive as people. This is one thing that the Programmed; cannot do. They do not become droll and mellow, nor do they hold wakes. Programmed people had no gallows humor; at all.

They would not have understood Paul's joke about the corpse who stuttered. They would have been puzzled by: Shanty's tale of the boar hog and the lightning rod salesman: and the deal they made; and how what the sows didn't know very nearly killed them. And Maxwell's story of thenew-dead lady whose soul was still wandering in the waste places when it became entangled in a drove of laden donkeys and was saddled and ridden by the donkey-drover would have left them cold.

And yet there was very sharp Programmed attention paid to it. The monitors in depth come on every time eight or more people are met together anywhere in civilized Astrobe. They had picked up the group when Rimrock came in, dropped it when Battersea left, and picked it up again when the boy Adam entered. These monitors are automatic, and they record and interpret everything they pick up on these forays. That was the difficulty.

They couldn't make anything out of the tales. They tied into Code-Crackers, and then into Code-Crackers-Supreme. And neither of these great programmed bureaus could crack the code. They couldn't at all figure what cryptic information was concealed in the tales.

The boy Adam told the story of the first human people ever to come to Astrobe; and it had been fifteen hundred years before the date that you will find given by the history precis. By the holies, it had been Saint Brandon himself in a coracle boat that was round as a tub. He sloshed and bounded in over the Stoimenbof Sea, with a great deal of drenching and bailing; but he had started his voyage in the North Atlantic Ocean on Old Earth; and he supposed that he was still sailing the same water, since he had never left it.

He piled out of the coracle when it ran onto land, and nineteen Irish monks with twinkling pates followed him out of the boat and onto shore. On first

arrival they found no living things on the shore except jerusalem conies, which would not answer their questions. But Saint Brandon and his nineteen monks set themselves to record whatever they might find in this new land.

Say, they mapped it all out and wrote it down on the scrolls with exact description of the plants and animals and the new land itself. They got down every bay and inlet where the Stoimenof Sea shatters into a dozen estuaries and slips, between what is Wu Town and Cathead now. It was a beautiful map and a comprehensive description.

Then they got back into the coracle boat and put up their sail that was no bigger than a shield. And in ninety-nine days they were back in Dingle Bay where they had started from.

But later explorers, going out into the North Atlantic Ocean of Old Earth, didn't find any such land as that; and they said that Saint Brandon had lied.

He had not. Those later explorers had gone in prow-ships that will hold a course, not in round coracle boats that can only be steered by prayer and fasting and are likely to wander clear off the Earth.

That was the story of the boy Adam; and Code-CrackersSupreme labored mightily to break the code and arrive at the cryptic meaning behind hit, and they couldn't do it. This wasn't code like you meet every night.

"Blessed be this rum," said Rimrock the ansel.

George the syrian told just how things are every time the world ends.

The only thing ever left over when the world ends, he said, is one syrian and one sand dune, all other features of the world being blotted out by the terminal catastrophes. There is that terrible second or million years when nothing moves-for a second and a million years are the same when there is no movement in anything. Then the syrian goes over behind the sand dune and finds a dromedary; and together they start the world going again.

"That is the way it was in the earliest version of Genesis," George said.

"That is the way the world begins every time. You will hear stories about a man and a woman, or about a turtle raising the sky up from off the earth.

Do not believe theml Every time the world begins it begins with a syrian and a dromedary. Now, I don't know what a dromedary is, I don't know what a sand dune is, and I sure don't know what a syrian is. The name was hung onto me, I believe, because I have a beak instead of a nose. The world will end again tomorrow. Watch then for a syrian and a sand dune. If the syrian goes behind the dune, there is hope; if he does not, or if there is neither syrian or sand dune, then the world is done forever."

Code-Crackers-Supreme suffered a breakdown about the time that George the syrian recounted this. It was not, perhaps, a serious breakdown; but it would take several hours to get code-crackers to functioning again.

So the monitoring was dropped. No point in setting down what even the codecrackers cannot crack.

"Blessed be this rum," said Evita.

Foreman? Fabian Foreman? What was he doing there? He was one of, the big men. How long had he been sitting in the midst of them?

"It's no great wonder," Foreman said. "I do not come through the walls, as Copperhead does. I have no strange powers, except a few that are beginning to appear in many. on Astrobe lately. I own this building, as I own every building that opens onto Centrality Square. I have my ways of coming into all of them. So I ducked in here to get away,; from the mobs outside-for there has been a great loosening, up of the people of Cosmopolis just within the last hour, and; perhaps of the other great Cities of Astrobe. They are having-.. a fools' holiday such as they have not had for a hundred'

years. Everyone thought they were too far gone in their golden lethargy for that, and here they are alive again. And yet now that I'm inside, I find I miss the clamor. It grows on you. Let's go out in the square and join with them.

Then Evita can go to the Thomas and reassure him that all is well, that Battersea's swift-striking commandos will rescue him from the high gibbet

at noon tomorrow. And he will still be King. And later, along about dawn, I will go in to him and talk a final talk with him."

They all went out into the square. There was happy fighting in the streets. Who would have imagined that such things could have happened on Civilized Astrobe? These were not lungers or hard-heads from Cathead and the Barrio. They were not even the in-between people of ambiguous Wu Town. They were the highly civilized people of Cosmopolis itself. It was a fools' carnival indeed, all split into high-spirited warring factions spilling over into masquerade. Heads were broken, and people laughed, as if it had been a thousand years before. The "Ban and Beyond" people had their banners flying, and flying wedges of opponents, with and without mottos, pulled them down in a glorious melee. The "Sackcloth and Ashes" faction was marching and joking. The newly-appointed (or self-appointed) Metropolitan of Astrobe had put that whole world under interdict, until penance be done and until certain conditions should be fulfilled; and groups were making up and singing ballads about it. High Ladies of Astrobe dressed up like old crones and hawked candy heads and skulls in honor of the beheading tomorrow. Wooly Rams were found somewhere, and spitted and barbecued over the bonfires, about fifty people devouring each Wooly Ram as they tore it apart in pieces, half seared and half raw. The feast of the Wooly Ram had not been held on Astrobe for more than three hundred years, and only antiquarians could have known about it.

It was a belated mid-summer eve hysteria, Spring-Rite and Easter and Corpus Christi together. It was carnival and city-wide wake. And all the detectable Programmed Persons were in hiding.

It was not that the human persons threatened. In the mood of this night, Programmed Persons would have been invisible to humans, completely unimportant to them, not to be noticed at all. But the Programmed felt fear, an emotion that was not even programmed into them. They could not reason this thing out at all, and reason is the only thing that the Programmed Persons have.

There was drinking and shouting, looting and arson, all carried out in pretty good spirits. Evita slipped off and in to see Thomas in his cell, to tell him that his death would not be a death, but a trained elite out of the hard-heads

of Cathead would rescue him, and he would still be King, with all new power.

There was a whole barrelful of new emotions spilled into the streets around Centrality Square. Anger, and who of the Citizens of Civilized Astrobe had been angry in their whole lives? Wonder, and which of them had ever wondered before? Truculence, battle-joy, recollection of things apart (perhaps of future things), revelry, serpents'-tooth remorse, utter penitence, pinnacled hope, joy-in-murder, joy-in-humility.

Serpentine and confetti, and there was not even the memory of them on Astrobe. Halloween and St. John's Eve masks, and even the great-great-grandfathers had forgotten about them. The "Head Hackers"

battled with the "Devastators."

Then the tolling began. On the great bells of a forgotten or museumized church, then on another and another, then on five hundred. Most of these Churches had been razed three hundred years agol How were their giant bells sounding the Old Old World Funeral Toll now? That sound had not been heard within living memory on Astrobe. But five hundred great bells were tolling, and the people remembered the names of them: the Archangel Gabriel with its full silver tone; the Giant, the White Ogre, the Shepherd King, Saint Peter, King of. Bavaria, Yellow Dwarf, Saint Simeon, the Dutchman, Archbishop Turpin, Rhinelander, Daniel, Jew Bell, Mephistopheles, the Black Virgin, Ship Bell, the Mountain, Saint Hilary.

Dozens of tons of swinging silver and bronze, all the old giant name-bells of the churches (almost all of them long since disappeared) rang out the heavy toll, and were recognized by their tones and remembered by their names of two hundred years ago. And one more, high and powerful and clear, the July Bell.

Evita was back, crying happy tears. The whole great golden unbelieving city of Cosmopolis did homage to Thomas More who would die tomorrow.

Only he wouldn't die after all, as he would be rescued by Battersea and his swift striking commandos:

Only he would die after all, after all, because both Copperhead and the boy Adam said that he would, and they were both given special vision.

13. APOCEPHALON

IT RAINED before morning. For unknown reasons, the controlled air domes were not working. It rained indiscriminately on the city of Cosmopolis. It did not merely rain on the parks and specified areas; it rained on the entire city.

It seemed almost natural for the rain to fall where it would. The air domes, whether from human or Programmed negligence, simply were not raised against it. A thing like this hadn't happened in Cosmopolis for a century.

First the carnival and the wild aberrations of the night before, and now an unregulated rain-though not a heavy one.

The Programmed guards were jumpy, and they had killed a few human persons accidently. There may have been some resentment of this, though the things were only following their programming. When people act peculiarly and carry on in an unaccustomed way, what are the Programmed guards to do but take action?

Fabian Foreman went in to see Thomas at the coming of rainy dawn. He found Thomas unusually placid for a man scheduled to die that day. The two weighed each other with cautious eyes, each wondering how many steps deep into the planning the other had guessed.

"You've given the people a carnival, Thomas," Foreman said. "I didn't believe they were any longer capable of it. They held a rousing wake for you, or perhaps it was for themselves. We have had very few executions in recent decades, and none that has grabbed the people as this one has.

You come very vivid and colorful to. them, much more so than when they made you World President. They recognize this as something fitting in you, as though you were born mainly for this gory death. It will be your moment, Thomas."

"Oh, be damned to you, Foremanl I've witnessed more executions that you have. A people will rise to one every time, like a fish to the bait, like a very great Devil-fish I saw rise not long since to a very great bait. It's the death that gets them, the untimely death. They love to see a man die."

"It isn't so, Thomas. There are eight thousand terminations a day in Cosmopolis alone. Almost all are open to the public, and hardly anyone attends. And they aren't monotonous things. Many of those having themselves terminated devise interesting and bloody deaths for themselves; they vie with each other in this and come up with some imaginative ends.

The fascination isn't in seeing a man die; it's in seeing a man die unwillingly."

"I wouldn't disappoint them, Foreman. If I go that road, I sure will not go it willingly. And the other way, to the terminators, I would not go at all. I can't understand a man`s accepting his end as calmly as that. And yet there's a whole.! clutch of people who say this entire world will end this morning; and all are quite calm about it. They were a little noisy in the night, though. It's said that there will be very large crowds gathered here before noon. Should a man take pride in the fact that the largest audience he draws in his life is that which comes to his death?"

"That whole clutch of people is right, Thomas. This world, Astrobe (and its old appendage, Earth), will end today. There is no stopping it. It is dying, and it will die. It, is in the article of death now."

"Oh, well then, I suppose a few honest men will have to get together and start a new world. I've a few ideas along that line myself."

"Too bad you'll be dead and not able to put them into effect, Thomas.

Well, how do you make a world and set it to going? George who is in aromatics says that in the beginning a syrian finds a dromedary, and together they start a world. Myself, I believe that a new world always grows out of a single mustard seed. I myself will plant a mustard seed at exactly nine o'clock this morning. I expect a new world to grow from it; and I hope I am alive to enjoy it."

"You've the hound-dog look, as though it were you rather than myself who were going to die today, Foreman."

"It could easily happen that I die too, Thomas. There will be a whiplash reaction to the events of this day, and any man too close to the action could easily lose a limb or a life over it. What is that odd stuff you are eating, Thomas?"

"My breakfast. They asked me what I wanted for my final meal. I believe that ritual requires that I be asked it. I told them that I wanted to dine on the brains of my enemies, on Programmed People brains. They brought me this. It's a chemical and magnetic mishmash of polarized memory gelatin. I suppose it is an element, the non-human element, of Programmed People brains. Dawn-world people ate their enemies' brains and acquired wit and strength from them. But I doubt if I'll acquire any wit, and certainly not any humor, from this bowl of the brains of mine enemy. The stuff isn't very good, but people and Things on Astrobe do take what you say literally."

"The Programmed Persons aren't our enemies, Thomas," Foreman said.

"They're only shadows of ourselves, of some of ourselves. Even the fearsome human thing they are shadow of may not be sheer enemy.

"Thomas, there are some things I'd like to convey to you before you die.

First of all, your death is absolutely required. I wish it weren't so." '

And Thomas was studying Foreman with guarded eyes. Did Foreman (who had been appointed High Civilian in Charge of Execution) suspect that there would be a rescue by the hard-heads of Cathead? And if he did suspect it, would it matter? Foreman was Thomas' closest friend on Golden Astrobe (as opposed to Cathead and the Barrio), and he was not at all committed to the Astrobe Dream, as were the others of the big men. He seemed now to be showing a quiet contempt for it. So why did he emphasize that Thomas' death was absolutely essential? Just how deft of mind was this man Foreman?

"It is no metaphor about the worlds ending today, Thomas," Foreman went on. "Or not entirely metaphor. The worlds do die periodically. I wonder why nobody except myself has noticed this. A world becomes an unstrung bow, or an unstrung corpse. All life and heat and pulse goes out of it. It dies, I tell you, in every bird and plant and rock and animal and person of it; in every mountain and sea, in every cloud. Its gravity and light and heat, its germ-life and its life-code, its meaning and its purpose are all extinguished in an instant. All life goes out of it. It ceases.

"After that, I do not know what happens. I have never personally witnessed the event, though I will witness it today. I'll have planted a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds. Something may grow from it, not off this world, but out of the void and into an entirely different world. This also, I believe, will take less than a single second."

"Fabian, you're full of morning wine," Thomas laughed. But he smothered his laugh into a crooked smile. A man due to be executed this day should not laugh too easily. Somebody might suspect that he was having the last laugh.

Thomas had his own game to play and his own emotions to guard. It would be a very nervous business up to that moment of crisis. He must not betray, even to his friend Fabian, that when the crowd really began to gather (shortly after ten o'clock, or two hours before the execution) it would not be an entirely random crowd; there would be a segment of that crowd, a strong slice from the edge to the center, made up of Battersea's picked men. They would be in the rough clothes of the Cathead lungers, in the bizarre garb of the citizens of Wu Town, and in the fine raiment of the people of Cosmopolis and the other golden cities. And in one moment, after Thomas had already mounted the scaffold and was ready to put his head on the block, that segment of the crowd would stiffen into a spear and drive in and strike. They'd grab him off, and would then become a corridor bringing him away from there fast, and then instantaneously by an instant travel booth already held and programmed. They wouldn't have to bring him thirty meters to it; and then he would be in the agreed-on place, and then to a third-stage place which even he did not know yet. He had every confidence in that hard man Battersea who had been a commando general, and he had

every confidence in himself. But he must not betray any uneasiness or apprehension, other than that expected in a man about to be executed.

But damn this Foreman! He gave the impression of seeing into everything. "I hope my friend is a friend indeed," Thomas said to himself.

And Foreman was talking; carefully and heavily, as though trying very hard to express something. Foreman had said once that he hated the word ineffable; that everything that could be understood could be expressed; and that everything could be understood. And yet he was having a little trouble now.

"I do not believe it at all inevitable that a world be reborn or replaced by another," Foreman said now. "It may have been so once, but it isn't now.

But it is inevitable that a world will die when its short span is gone. I do not believe that there have been a million cycles of this in the five hundred million years of complex life on the worlds. I feel that the cycles were once of very long duration, and that they shorten and shorten. They now fill their course about every five hundred years. And, as the cycle shortens so does each succeed another more hardly. Each time it becomes more difficult for the new world to be born."

"Bring a little plain talk into the allegory, Fabian," Thomas said. "What are you hiding under that flashy fleece, a sheep or a goat or a dog?"

"A corpse, Thomas, with all the life gone out of it-yours, and the world Astrobe's. Just that, and perhaps nothing to follow. Though I have my strong hopes, and my careful plans."

But Thomas was not really listening to him. "Listen!" Thomas said.

"They're singing a ballad about me in the square outside. And the Ballad drifted in:

"Thomas is a peculiar guy, never a clue; without any head he's better than you. Blade in the sky and hackles are high; without any head he's better than you."

"Why, it's gutter music like deprived children in the Barrio would sing,"

Foreman said with strong disapproval. "Where have the civilized people of Cosmopolis come by such gibberish? One would think they'd sing something noble."

"It is noble, Fabian. And it's true, by God. Even without a head I'm better than the whole lot of you that have been running this show! A thousand years dead, and I have more life in me than the pack of you. It has the fine tone of one of the old ballads, and I'd rather they'd sing me by it than by finer song. I'd give a lot, Foreman, to watch my own beheading, but the principal is disadvantaged in this case. I'll give it all I've got, and I'll have the worst view of all of the rolling head."

"Gallows humor is fine, Thomas, but I am trying very hard to say something very important. I am not one of the few who believe in the Beyond, Thomas, though I have made certain experiments towards inducing belief in myself. They didn't work. I will only say that there is something in all this that is beyond me. I look at this scientifically, Thomas, I try to see it by the science of cosmology and eschatology and psychology (using the parts of that word as the Greeks used them) and isostatic balance of the intellect and plane, tary biology; and logic and ethical compensation and vitalism; I try to see it by the soft sciences as well as by the hard ones; magneto-chemistry and neucleo-physics. I ask scientifically what is the real phenomenon here: that the worlds do die. periodically; and that, in previous cases again an instant later. But the new worlds are not identical with what. they were having only the cloudiest and most fragmented memory of what they had been the instant before, and no real identity with the previous thing. But that this does happen is scientific (known and observed) fact known to me, at least.

"You yourself were in on one of the previous deaths of the worlds, Thomas. Have you any strong idea about what really happened?"

Thomas was not too clear about what Foreman was getting at. And Foreman, moreover, though he talked rapidly and seriously as though this were of the utmost importance, seemed to be listening for some token, for some signal.

"It isn't necessary that you explain a difcult thing to me at this moment,"

Thomas said. "If I die, then at the Particular Judgment I will receive all such knowledge from One more facile with words than yourself. If I do not die, then we can talk of this again in a calmer time."

"I've been searching for a gentle way to tell you, Thomas; you will die this morning, and all other hopes are vain. And as I do not believe in either the Particular or the General judgment or in Things Beyond at all, I do not believe you will receive these ideas if you do not receive them from me now.

And I want you to have them."

"Oh, as to the end of my own world, Foreman, no I do not have any strong idea about what really happened. I study back and try to construct it.

I am shown, as it were, a house and a town and a world, and I am informed that this was the house and the town and the world that I lived in, that this is the true picture of those good things immediately after I left them. And I am puzzled. I lived in that house and town? I myself? I hardly recognize a stick or stone of it. I hardly recognize a person of it, and yet hundreds of them bear the names of persons I knew well. I don't believe your instant death and rebirth thing for the worlds; but there was a sudden fundamental change in my own world, near about the sudden end of my own life. And I don't understand it at all.

"Foreman, you butter-mouthed Barnabas, what do you mean that I will die this morning and that all other hope is vain? Tell me or I'll throttle you here. What do you know about what I know?"

"Why, nothing, Thomas, nothing at all. Is it not assumed that you will die?

Is there some doubt about it? Would anybody be happier than I if you could be delivered from it in any manner whatsoever?"

"Foreman, you have all the innocence of a ninety-nine year old serpent.

Well, go on with your thing! I'm something of a critic of historical theses, and we have long hours to pass before my killing."

"That's another thing I've been searching for a gentle way to tell you, Thomas: we do not have long hours, we have only short minutes. We have this cycle, Thomas. At the time of the birth of Christ, the clear cruel Roman Republic (under the first Emperor who considered himself a Republican) died in an instant; and an instant afterwards the Late Empire was born full-grown. It was always the Late Empire; it was an afternoon and evening thing. And there was really not much resemblance between those worlds; the simple cruel thing, and, the complexly bizarre thing, at the same time cruel and compassionate, that was the Late Empire. Five hundred years later it happened again. The Empire was gone like morning frost, and the Lower Middle Ages, completely different, obtained. In another five hundred years, the High Middle Ages followed on the corpse of the Low, and there was never such difference as between these two worlds. In another five hundred years, the High Middle Ages died (as did you yourself), and another thing was born which you are not able to recognize although it carried names that you knew well. And after another five hundred years, that world died completely. A new world was born instantly, and the first settlement of Astrobe coincided with that rebirth. This new thing became the World of Astrobe, as Old Earth lost importance and meekly followed our world. This is the world that dies this morning, and I am worried about it.

"This is the first time the cycle has been completed on Astrobe, and each time it happens, it seems that the rebirth is less likely to succeed. I don't know what goes on when a world dies; there must be, I believe, a bit of the transcendent yeast to make it rise again. Something must trigger a re-_ action. There was building a reaction to the "Ban the Be.. yond" push, and the blood of the spotted lamb (yourself) will cinch it. The previous yeastings were all such simple things, but they were necessary. There really is this necessity: that a small quantity of the immaterial (however it is named in the equation) be added to the mass every five hundred years or so. It may be a simple chemical-psychic requirement which we do not understand. Myself, who have sought and been unable to find personal faith, am inclined to believe that it is no more than this. But the requirement is there that' something be added now and then, or the worlds will not live

again. Your death .and the reaction to it will be the trigger, the mustard seed, We plant it now."

Battersea, is all well with you? Are you watching the clock? Only a few more hours.

"Ten minute call!" pinged a mechanical voice.

"All right, Thomas," Foreman said. "We go now to your end. Come, come."

"Now? Are you out of your mind? It's not yet eight o'clock. I die at noon.

Nothing is ready, nothing-"

"The scaffold is ready, Thomas, and the blade is ready. Here, here, good devices, pinion him! He's got a streak of the heroic in him. I am sorry, Thomas, but there was no other way to do it."

"Get your tin talons off me, you devil toys! Eternal damnation! Who changed the time, Foreman?"

"I did, Thomas. You die at eight o'clock. There was no other way to do it."

"No, no, I die at noonl Foreman, do you understand what you're doing?"

"Perfectly. I guessed all about the Battersea thing, of course. He was a fine commando general in his way; and I was his commander. I could always read him, and I picked up the details easily."

"Why do you murder me, Foreman? I counted you a friend. And you have no loyalty to the Astrobe thing."

"No, I have no loyalty to the Astrobe corpse, Thomas, and I am your friend. I assure you that there was no other way to bring it off. The reaction to your foul murder, joined to many other long-building things, should touch off a terrible reaction: the rediscovery of humanity-don't you believe a world can be reborn out of that, Thomas? It only takes one shot to signal a charge."

"I say no man ever before slew his friend mouthful of words."

"And I say it has happened many times before. Consider the Assassinations, Thomas, you who are something of a critic of historical theses. Consider whether the Heroes have not more often been assassinated by friends than by enemies; consider whether some of them have not even been assassinated with their own consent."

"I don't consent."

"If everything else has failed, if a program has fallen for such a silly nothing, if the hero would make a better hero when dead, then he was made a dead hero by his friends, for his own sake and the sake of his program. I could name a dozen clear cases of this, but I won't; strong partisan feelings are still involved in some of them after the centuries.

-Thomas, my friend, you'd have throttled me if you'd broken loose then.

Tighter with him, guards, and now walk him along. This has to be fast or something might spoil it"

"It's a thing to make you doubt your friends, my friend," Thomas growled to him as he fought with his Programmed guards. "Why me, Fabian? Why did you call me to it?"

"You were the only ultimately honest man I could think of, Thomas, and I considered a lot of them. You'd shown it before, stubborn honesty unto death even for a point which you hardly came to understand at the end. I reasoned that you had done it once and you would do it again in similar circumstances. I reasoned that you had a curious magnetism about you, that you had become a symbol once, and that you would become a symbol again. We had almost run out of symbols on Astrobe."

"I die for it, and I don't even know what it's about," Thomas moaned as they dragged him out to the scaffold. And dragging him was a battle. He set up a noise.

"People, people!" he shouted in his high and sandy voice. "There's no right about this thing! Smash the high trickery!"

And the people had begun to gather, tame people with a new wild look about them. Like wolves they were, and they snuffed and howled.

Panlykonium reigned in Centrality Square, .and the air sparked with danger.

Nevertheless, by setting the time early, Foreman had surprised the opposition; and the execution would be brought off if it could be done quickly. Thomas fought the mechanical guards who dragged him out, but they brought him to a standstill before Pottscamp, who had a last official thing to convey.

"Will you reconsider?" Pottscamp asked Thomas as he confronted him in the middle of Centrality Square right at the foot of the scaffold.' It was required by ritual that this be asked. "It is so easy to save your life, good Thomas," the Pottscamp went on. "Sign now, and live happily. Or die meanly. In that case I will succeed as Surrogate President, and I will have signed the bill within five minutes. And you, Thomas, will have died for nothing."

"Snake-in-my-brain, I will not have died for the Oudennothingl I will not signl I see now what Thing you are trying to kill, and to me it is the only Thing that matters. So late I have come back to it. I will not reconsider. On with it, guards! Off with my head if only to close my ears to this babblel Out of my way, you damnable jump-jack!"

They took Thomas up the steps of the scaffold. And Pottscamp fled as though stricken. What? What? How would he flee as though stricken?

This was spectacle. The magnetic man with the mystery about him was up on the death tower with the whole world watching, and he was even more in command than at the time of his ovation on his public coming into Cosmopolis.

Kingmaker and Proctor watched it from high windows and justified themselves. It was easy for Proctor; he had justification programmed into him.

Nobody knows what Foreman felt when he watched Thomas taken up the scaffold.

Pottscamp felt nothing; he was, of course, a machine without feeling. He had no conscience or compassion. This would not bother him at all.

It wouldn't?

Then why did he-?

Then why did he-WHAT?

Sat on the ground and moaned and howled like an old Hebrew. And poured dust and ashes over his head.

You're crazy. He really did that?

He really did that.

Thomas More had been World President, King, for nine days. And now he would die.

The early-morning rain had stopped, and now there was a rush to complete the act. The men from Cathead, so rumor went, had received word of the sudden change of time. They were mobbing toward the center of Cosmopolis, but they might well be too late.

Smooth and swift and calculated, the execution, and there was nothing could stop it.

There was one wave of fury, a minute thing as to the bulk of it, but incomparably savage. There is always one such small mad wave, rising to foaming and furious height all out of proportion to its bulls, that rises and strikes a very few moments before a true tidal wave or world-wave strikes.

It is called the forerunner wave.

Buff Shanty and Paul with the crooked face were in it, each driving in with an impetus equal to that of many men. Walter Copperhead was in it-though,

being a necromancer, he must have known that it was 'futile, that he would die in it, that they would all die in it. The boy Adam was in it; and possibly thirty other persons, fine people of of Cosmopolis and not rowdy outlanders, were in on the rush and died in it.

Its suddenness almost gave it success. The impetuous men bowled over the mechanical guards and gained the scaffold steps. Then the fighting was close, and they gave one life for every step they ascended. The boy Adam was really the crest of the wave, for he got all the way up the scaffold and touched Thomas. And he was flung all the way down with crushing force by the guards with their grapples. And yet he was up again, brokenly going after them. Shanty and Paul and Copperhead and Adam, and the thirty or more other persons, died around the foot of the scaffold and on the steps, making them slippery with their blood. The boy Adam, in particular, died magnificently as he always did.

But the wave had no real bulk, and the guards were too many and strong. The thrust crested and shattered, and then it was over with, ebbing out in its blood.

But Evita, knowing that it would fail, knowing instantly that it would all fail, had surged not towards Thomas on the high platform, but towards Fabian Foreman, who stood on the edge of Centrality Square.

"Zehheeroot, is-Kerioth," she howled at him, for they were both of the old people: "Beware, Iscariot." Then she had him like a lioness taking a frightened ass, swiping half his face red with her claws and biting into his throat to set up a throbbing red fountain.

"Let go me, you witch!" Foreman screamed in sudden terror.

"I be a cold fury and not a witch," she emitted with a purring rumble.

"Woe to him by whom it comes. You told a History to the Thomas, and I tell one to you as you die." And she was killing him as she growled the words.

"Certain primitives were wont to kill a dog to be company to the hero on his death journey. I am such a primitive. You are such a dog."

And she was practically dismembering him. She had broken his shoulder and possibly him apart.

"No, no, woman!" Foreman gasped as the blood pulsed out of his torn throat. "I'm the master of it all. It has to be this way. The furious reaction, the transcendent yeast will set humanity back into its proper place again and let a new world be born."

"I know it!" Evita sang. "I'm a bunch of that transcendent yeast. I'm the heart of that furious reaction! I revel in it. And we've had a dog for puppeteer all this late time. No wonder it's been a time of trouble."

She broke his face completely with a lioness blow. It was a sad time for Foreman, who had always rather withdrawn from violence, he had been a desk general and not a field general.

Evita threw him over her shoulder, though he was a shapeless and heavy man, and carried him with that tawny ease with which a lioness carries her prey, carried him to where George the syrian and Maxwell the old crone and Rimrock the ansel were grouped together. She threw him to them, and the four of them tore him to pieces and killed him.

Evita took the biggest piece of Foreman that was left and hanged it on an ornamental tree on the edge of Centrality Square. It was a Carob tree from Old Earth, sometimes called the Judas Tree.

It was unjust. Foreman had done his part Well. He had planned it all, except that special little bit by which he lost his life. And everything that he had planned was meant well.

She was tearing his back.

The programmed guards got George and Maxwell and Rimrock and added their blood to the transcendental yeast that was beginning to work.

They did not get the Evita. Nobody would get her till the thing was done.

Things went smoothly after those little outbreaks. The crowds were kept back, for the guards were very efficient. There was one man who broke through and nobody was able to stop him. Indeed, the programmed guards did not seem able to see him or sense him. This stranger went right up to Thomas on the scaffold and spoke to him, though only Thomas appeared able to hear his words.

They discussed, the condemned man and the stranger that the guards did not seem able to see. Thomas seemed both excited and pleased.

"Will it work, do you think?" he cried loudly with what was almost delight.

"How droll! Can a man have more heads than two? I'll do it. I'll go with you."

But apparently Thomas didn't go, anywhere but to his death. The stranger disappeared down and back into the crowd or some said that he disappeared into the charged air. There would be guesses as to his identity.

There were those who said that something disappeared from Thomas at the same moment-that he left in his essence, and that it was a shadow man who put his head .on the block. A weird old woman cried out that she could see through him; but this was illusion.

The rest of it is legend stuff. All of it the quips and the epigrams and the profound and moving things that Thomas was supposed to have said at the chopping block: well, some of them were pretty good, some of them were almost: too cute, and most of them are in the books of quotations.The only thing amiss is that he didn't say any of them.

He hadn't said them the first time either.

The only last words that he said on the scaffold were "Paten in manus tuas-" a scrap of an old prayer.

The big blade trembled in the sky. Then it fell. It was real blood that spurted and a real hand that rolled clear from the corpus as though it had a life of its own.

There would be wild stories, the prodigies, the old wives' tales-such as nine snakes slithering out of the severed head; such as the most beautiful woman of Astrobe going up the scaffold and boldly taking the head in a basket, and being turned into an old woman when she came down with it.

But no such things really happened. They could not have.

But one thing did really happen at that moment. At the moment that life flickered out of the beheaded corpus, the worlds came to an end.

All life and heat and pulse went out of the world. It died in every bird and rock and plant and person of it, in every mountain and sea and cloud. It died in its gravity and light and heat, in its germ-life and in its life-code.

Everything ceased. And all the stars went out.

Was it for a moment? Or a billion years? Or forever? There is no difference in them, when the world is ended, when there is no time to measure time by.

Remember how it had been at the moment when the worlds ended? A priest renegade for thirty years had just become Metropolitan of Astrobe. A programmed machine had, at the moment of the extinction of the worlds, succeeded to president of Astrobe: an emotionless machine. But he had wailed and poured ashes over his head.

Battersea and his men were mobbing towards Centrality Square to begin their bloody coup, mobbing in furiously under their Hand-of-Vengeance banner. On such notes the worlds ended.

And is a new world born? Is a new world yeasted? The furious reaction, does it bridge the gap? The mustard seed, does it grow? The Judas tree, what fruit did it bear?

Lightning, a billion times as bright as that on Electric Mountain, a billion times as short in duration, does it lace the things together with its instantaneous fire, or sunder them forever? Thunder that flattens worlds with the shock of it, and a tidal wave, a world wave carrying away the

golden fungus from the orb! In much less than an instant, in much more than forever, it is over with.

But has it sequence? Does a new world follow the old in that blinding flash? Does it come?

Be quiet. We watch.

The Hand-of-Vengeance banner, is its symbol misunderstood?

Northprophet says that that figured hand coming down like a bird is the Left Hand of God.

Remember (and we remember as in a void of time between worlds) the turn of the cycle that gave birth to Rome? The one that gave birth to Europe? The one that gave birth to the Americas? The one that gave birth to Astrobe? Remember the cycles whose effect was internal and electrifying, the one where divinity became humanity? The one where humanity became divinity?

And remember that special one, the first rebirth of Astrobe, the appearance of transcendent humanity?

Remember it? Then it happened?

Be quiet. We wait.

The spirit came down once on water and clay. Could it not come down on gell-cells and flux-fix? The sterile wood, whether of human or programmed tree, shall it fruit after all? The Avid Nothingness, the diabolically empty Point-Big-0, is it cast away again? Is there then room for life? Shall there be return to real life?

Well does it happen? Does the reaction become the birthing? What does it look like?

Will we see it now, in face and rump, the new-born world?

Be quiet. We hope.